

## Dirty Little Secrets Temple Hogan

Billie learns quickly that being in the wrong place at the wrong time can get a girl killed, unless she has handsome Greek Detective Dare Stephanos on her side. From the moment they lay eyes on one another their libidos explode and they become lost in their mutual desire. But the bliss is short lived when trouble arrives at the doorstep with one thought in mind — to kill Billie. As they escape, Dare wonders what he's doing, until he looks at Billie and realizes he'll risk anything to get her in his bed again.

Forced to run for her life, Billie is a woman used to taking care of herself and although she's deeply attracted to Dare, she knows she has to find her own way out of the danger that surrounds her. But time and again, she finds Dare at her side, protecting her and giving her the most satisfying, mouth watering sex she's ever had. How can a girl say no to that? An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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**Dirty Little Secrets** 

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Electronic book publication August 2010

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# DIRTY LITTLE SECRETS

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## Acknowledgements

I want to thank the Grand Rapids Region Writers Group, which sustained me through thick and thin, and my great critique group for their laughter and encouragement. You are a great group of intelligent, witty ladies. I want to especially thank my editor, Grace Bradley, who has worked patiently with a computer illiterate – that would be me – to make *Dirty Little Secrets* a better book. Last of all, but never least, my wonderful husband, without whom I likely wouldn't be here and who makes me laugh even when it hurts!

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## **Chapter One**

He was a bastard; a brutish son of a bitch who meant to rape her the first chance he got. His chances were pretty good. She was naked and flat on her back, trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey. Her fingers curled around the ropes that bound her hands above her head. When he and his pals were finished with her, he was going to kill her. She'd overheard him talking about his orders. For a black moment, panic danced at the edge of her consciousness and she couldn't see any way to escape. Then an icy calm settled into her veins. The time had come to do something, otherwise, come Monday morning her body would be found floating in the muddy waters of the Detroit River.

She was ready. It had taken her three hours and four broken fingernails to loosen the knots holding her hands and each agonizing minute of those three hours was spent planning her strategy. Patiently, she waited. The taste of revenge, a sweet anticipation on the back of her tongue, helped erase the bitter taste of fear.

He paused at the foot of the bed where she was tied and grinned, a missing-tooth smirk, as if they were going to have an afternoon tea, but she'd bet this guy had never been to a tea in his lifetime. He ran a rough hand up and down her calf, squeezing the muscle hard so she jerked despite herself.

"I like your shoes," he said lasciviously, eying her red leather stilettos. "I hear they're called fuck-me shoes and that's what I'm going to do with you, baby." He continued to rub her leg, rougher than any woman would have liked. She said nothing.

"We're going to have a good time," he sneered. "When we're done a couple of the guys want to have their turn."

When she made no reply, he jerked her leg hard and moved closer, unzipping his pants as he came. This was the moment she'd waited for. She tightened her hold on the ropes to give herself leverage. Arching her back, she kicked out, hoping her stiletto heel hit something vital, like a jugular. She planted her foot as hard as she could in his shiteating face and heard him grunt with surprise and pain. The blow drove him sideways but her other foot was already there, kicking him again.

His head jerked back the other way, his thick lips spattering blood, his eyes rolling upward. He landed nose-deep in the crotch he'd been about to abuse. She scissored her thighs closed, squeezing until she thought his brains might pop out the top of his fat, bald head. When she let go, he was no longer conscious but he was smiling.

The bastard wasn't dead. Long live the bastard's friends until she got to them.

She grabbed a raincoat as she ran out. It was loose and dirty and smelled of sweat and other things she didn't want to identify, but she wasn't particular at this moment. Pausing to glance over her shoulder, she kicked off her ridiculously high stilettos and scooped them up against her chest.

On the dark street that even Detroit Edison couldn't brighten, she set out at a jog, east toward Cobo Hall. She kept to the shadows and the back streets and checked for car lights. Not too many people were moving at this time and she didn't want to tangle with those who were. It took her ten minutes of steady jogging to reach the alley behind her office building.

Her building. The Cramer building. She might be a con artist, but she was a rich one. Never mind the dangers involved with what she did, the risk was worth it.

She'd bought her building herself when other yuppies were spending their first million on trips to Europe and the Bahamas. It wasn't the biggest building on the block but it was sturdy brick and glass and nearly impenetrable. And it was a block from Cobo and two blocks from the once new Renaissance Center which was still the pride of downtown Detroit. A few blocks away were the new casinos and theaters and swanky restaurants that made up a large part of the city's renovation.

She limped to the dumpster, glanced around, then ducked behind, dug out a brick and retrieved her emergency key. For the first time she noticed she was carrying only one shoe. Well shit! It was that kind of day. She opened the back door. She'd make sure a locksmith would be here at first light to change all the locks. The bastards had stolen her wallet and keys.

"Lucy?" A male voice called as she mounted the stairs to the third floor. God, she hated that name and he knew it, but lately he thought it was cute to needle her with it. She didn't answer. It was bad enough to deal with bastards all day, let alone come home to one.

She rounded the landing and there he was in all his glorious Latino prime. Carlos Jose Edmundo Diego. She suspected the Diego was an affectation but he looked and sounded like Tony Banderas and he was the best fuck she'd had lately. Maybe he even fucked better than Banderas, she didn't know, never having had the privilege of making that comparison. But she'd been willing to keep him around for a while.

"My god, Lucy," he said with his sexy, Latin accent when he caught sight of her. "What happened to you?"

"Long story." She threw off the filthy raincoat, mindless of her nudity, and poured herself a stiff Bourbon, swigged it down, poured another and carried it with her to the bathroom.

She knew he was watching but she pretended not to notice. She stepped into a hot shower and let the tension and revulsion wash down the drain with all the other filth of the last three hours. She'd just been beaten, robbed and nearly raped, but she wasn't going to Detroit's finest. The police would do very little. She was going to handle this little matter herself.

She scrubbed her hair and body then scrubbed it again, wrapped herself in thick terry cloth and slathered expensive, scented lotion on every inch that didn't ache. Then she scrubbed her teeth and threw away the toothbrush. She stared at herself for a long time in the steamed bathroom mirror while she sipped the whiskey, grateful for the burn all the way down to her belly. She thought about the fat fuck who'd tried to assault her and cursed his soul to bloody hell. She hoped she had killed him. Well, perhaps not really. She turned out the light.

Carlos was awake when she climbed into bed. He grinned and reached for her. He knew his role and was conscientious about it.

"Not tonight," she sighed.

"Why not?" He pouted. She owed him an explanation.

"I was kidnapped and nearly raped tonight. They were going to kill me."

"Oh, baby. How did that happen to you?" He ran a hand over her hair and down her back under the guise of comforting while he copped a feel. "Who did it? How? Was it someone you knew?"

"Yeah, I knew them." She was relaxing under his stroking.

"Why would they do that to you?" He slid a hand between her legs.

She shrugged. "A few days ago I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now it's catching up with me."

"Are you all right, *dulce*?" He could be sweet when he wanted.

"I survived. But I'll make those bastards pay." The muscles of her stomach jumped and tightened. "Not tonight, Carlos."

He moved closer. "You could still do me," he suggested. "I've been horny all night."

She had a sudden urge to plant a stiletto in his handsome Latin face, but he wasn't worth the effort.

"The last guy who tried to force sex on me ended up unconscious, maybe dead. You want to chance it?" She glared at him over her shoulder.

"Bitch!" he muttered and flounced away from her. She fell asleep to the sound and rhythm of him whacking off.

\* \* \* \* \*

The bastard opened the blinds. Sunlight beat against her eyelids until finally she pried them open. Carlos perched on the end of the bed looking at her with sad, dark eyes.

"I'm packed."

"Good." She flopped over.

"The car is here to pick me up."

"What car?" She regarded him through strands of Nino Salvitore's most costly and expertly applied honey blonde. "What car?"

Carlos looked slightly crestfallen. "Ah, Lucille Elizabeth Stone. My innocent little Lucy. What car? Why, the car of Helen Savage. She has been waiting for me, but I would not leave you before this. Now, I know it is time I move on to someone who will..." He paused and shrugged, one dark eyebrow flicking upward delicately. "Appreciate me better than you do, Lucy."

"Oh, shit." She flopped an arm over her eyes while she thought. He wanted her to persuade him to stay. If only he hadn't called her Lucy. God, she hated that name. In a flurry of warm sibling bonding her mother had named her after a favorite sister. By the time Billie was two the sisters weren't speaking but she was still stuck with Lucille Elizabeth Stone. Except she'd insisted she be called Billie since before her mother dropped her off at the Children's Home at the tender age of seven.

She'd revealed her real name to Carlos one night when she'd had too much to drink and he'd been especially inventive in his lovemaking. Just goes to prove, she thought, never trust a man, even if he has his dick buried in you. Especially then.

"You're right. It *is* time," she said, thinking he was getting what he deserved for reminding her of old family feuds.

He looked startled. "You would let me go?"

She nodded. "I think it would be best for you, Carlos. I don't have time to...appreciate you enough. You're a handsome, sexy man. You need to make it count while you can."

"But, Lucy." His voice was rich and dramatic. "I will stay if you want me to."

"It's best this way." She sat up and slid out of bed. Unabashed by her nudity she crossed to her desk and took out her checkbook. "Will twenty-five thousand make you feel better?"

"You don't have to do that." He crossed to her and she saw that he hadn't dressed yet and he had a hard-on through his silk shorts.

"Of course I do. If I were richer, I'd give you more. Helen can do that." She held the check out to him. Her gaze was friendly when it met his, but his expression said he read the finality there. He took the check.

"I'm sorry I didn't please you enough."

"You did." She felt tired and really didn't care about this conversation, but she'd never been one to destroy an ego especially one as fragile as Carlos'. "The time for us has ended. Goodbye, Carlos. It was fun while it lasted." She uttered the cliché and bit her lip to keep from laughing. He must have seen it in her eyes though, because with a final twitch of his well-honed buttocks, he turned away only to come to an abrupt halt as a woman entered from the landing.

"Welcome to my bedroom," Billie said, drawing on a silk robe and casting a reprimanding gaze at Carlos. "How did you get in here?"

"I gave her my key," Carlos said spitefully.

"What can I do for you, Helen, besides give you Carlos?" she snapped.

"Oh, my dear," the blonde woman said moving closer with a liquid grace that belied her age. "You had no need to give him to me. I take what I want."

"And I keep what I want," Billie answered in the same light tone. With a bemused smile she watched as Helen Savage looked at her with naked lust. She'd heard tales about this aging dilettante and guessed Carlos would be only a passing fancy and quickly replaced.

Helen threw back her head and chuckled. "I like your style," she said softly. "You're bold and direct and very beautiful." She prowled like an animal stalking its prey. When she reached Billie, she halted, her lips still curved in the smug, superior grimace she called a smile. Her gaze holding Billie's, she reached out one clawlike hand with its vermilion-tipped fingers and slowly stroked down Billie's throat to her breast. Billie drew back with a moue of disgust. Helen's grin widened. Her lipstick had feathered into the tiny vertical wrinkles that women get as they age, making her lips look distorted.

"You were leaving?" Billie asked, eyes narrowed. Helen's face flushed with anger. She wasn't used to being turned down. With that much money she'd always been able to buy what she wanted. Now she wanted Billie. She was breathing heavily, eyes glassy. Her tongue darted out and she licked her lips hungrily.

"I'll pay you, of course," she said harshly.

"I'm not interested," Billie's tone was flat. She turned her back and in the reflection of her mirror, she saw Helen's face twist in fury.

"Don't put too high a price on yourself," the older woman said. "You're only a cunt and they're a dime a dozen on the street corners."

"Then go down there," Billie said irritably, tired of this game, tired of the people in her bedroom. "You can get a bargain price." Helen's face flushed red. After a long moment, she snapped her fingers at Carlos who had moved to one side, watching the two of them in a play that had nothing to do with him.

"Are you ready?" Helen demanded and flung her fox stole over her shoulders.

"*Si, mi amor.* For you, I am always ready." He moved forward quickly to take her hand and place a kiss on it. Helen drew away in a gesture so abrupt, it seemed she meant to strike him.

"Take your things down to the car," she ordered peremptorily and stared at him with cold eyes as he leaped to do her bidding then turned her attention back to Billie.

"He's a child. I fear I'll soon grow tired of him," she said, although Carlos had not yet left the room.

For a moment, Billie felt sorry for him, then shrugged. "He'll be as good as you need him to be."

Helen's lips curved in a malicious smile. "Having second thoughts? I'll send him back when I'm finished with him."

"When you're finished with him, I won't touch him."

Once again Helen's face twisted in anger. She sent a scathing look up and down Billie's body then snapped her fingers again.

"One day, you'll come to me," she said with deadly softness. "Then I think you'll speak a different language."

Billie shrugged and cocked one hip boldly. She knew the other woman was having a hard time keeping her gaze off her scantily clad body. Let the rich bitch eat her heart out. There were some things in life even money couldn't buy.

"I need you to leave now," she said faking a yawn. "I haven't slept out."

With a huff of outrage and injured pride, Helen Savage whirled and stalked from the room.

Long after the door downstairs had slammed shut, Billie waited. Carlos was gone and she felt no regrets, especially after his betrayal with Helen. He was good, but pretty boys like him were a dime a dozen. Helen was welcome to him.

Finally, she went down to set the bolt lock and do a quick inventory. He had helped himself to some of her jewelry and had taken the several hundred dollars of petty cash she kept in the office. She counted herself lucky he was gone.

Her life had taken a turn to shit, no doubt about that, but she'd get through it. She always had. She always would.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dare Stefanos." The tall, lean-muscled detective brushed blue-black hair from his brow and wedged the phone between one shoulder and a jaw heavy with five o'clock shadow.

"Dare? Merkel, here. How ya' doing, buddy?" The voice was forced joviality.

Dare thought for a minute. "About the same as all the other times you called." Phil and the old guys from Homicide had never called him since he was transferred out, so he paused, letting his irony sink in, but Phil Merkel wasn't a man to be stopped for too long.

"Now don't take it that way, Dare. I've thought about you a lot over the past six months. You got a bum rap. I tell everyone that."

"Well, that's real decent of you, Phil. I'm kind of busy now. What do you want?"

Merkel laughed, a full-bodied chuckle that brought back memories of McKilly's after work, of rainy cold outside and steamy heat inside with the press of too many bodies in too little space. McKilly's was a favorite hangout for cops. He'd looked forward to those times with the guys from Homicide lined up at the bar, bullshitting and bellyaching about one thing or another.

The air space went too quiet and Dare guessed Merkel was remembering too.

"Look, Dare. You can stay pissed off and pout or you can listen to what I have to tell you. Consider it part of a payback on what I—on what we all owe you."

"I'm listening." Dare hoped his voice didn't betray the surge of adrenaline that pumped through his veins.

"I'm down here at Congress and First about a mile from downtown at a shithole apartment. We got a call about a homicide. Some guy was found dead with his dick hanging out."

"That's nothing new. But you forget I work Bunco for the DA now." Dare's voice was bitter.

"I haven't forgotten," Merkel's voice came back. "That's why I'm calling you. You were one of the best we had and you got the shaft. We know you didn't have anything to do with Teddy Boyd's setup. He was a dirty cop and he stained all of us."

"None of you got bumped from Homicide."

"Raw deal for you. If it hadn't been for you, we wouldn't have gotten him. You should been given a commendation. That's water over the dam now. Listen, what I have might work for you as well. This guy was known to be in all kinds of scams, strictly small-time and now he's dead."

"He tried to cheat the wrong guy?"

"I don't think it was the wrong guy. The stiff had his dick hanging out like he had business with someone. He died with two puncture wounds to his head and a bloody stiletto heel was found outside."

"So he was into kinky sex, nothing that would interest my department."

"The funny thing is, Dare, the guy didn't die from the puncture wounds, he was shot in the back of the head, execution style, and from the way he was smiling and the muff juice all over his face – well, you get the picture."

"You mean something like death by pussy?" He waited for Merkel's chuckle to die down. "Sounds like the poor bastard had a rough lady friend."

"From the ropes at the head of the bed, I'm betting she wasn't a willing lady friend."

"What do you want from me?" Dare rubbed his brow and told himself he wasn't with Homicide anymore and none of this should matter to him.

"It's your neck of the woods and like I said the corpse was a known scam artist. I thought maybe you might have information on him."

"What's his name?"

"We haven't ID'd him yet."

"And you want me to come down and look at the body?"

"Something like that. It'd save us some steps and we're swamped right now. I thought maybe if you worked on this case it would free us up to concentrate on some of the more important..." At least he had the grace not to try talking his way out of that. After a minute, Dare took pity on him.

"Are you still at the scene?"

"Yeah, it'll be a while before the ME gets here."

"I'll come on down after I clear up some things here." Dare hung up. There was no need to hurry, the man was dead and the police were covering the scene. Merkel would wait because he wanted Dare there.

Darius Stefanos, Dare for short, didn't think of himself as a particularly clever man, just a normal guy who'd grown up in Detroit's Greek neighborhood before it turned uptown and got sophisticated with boutiques and casinos.

The only saving grace in his misbegotten life was his job. He was good at it. He had advanced through the ranks from patrol cop to homicide detective at a pace, if not meteoric, at least steady.

When he reached Homicide, he knew he'd found his niche. He had an intuitive gift for sorting the chaff so the grain of truth came through. He'd gained a reputation for good, solid police work and he was proud of his standing, proud of the police force until he'd gotten caught up in the Boyd fiasco. No one ever believed he was not involved and no one could prove he was.

Dare had argued there was someone else in the department on the take along with Boyd, but everyone believed it was Dare. Only one man could prove his innocence and that man was Ted Boyd and his old partner had gone to ground. So, Dare had been transferred and now he hunkered down in the DA's Bunco squad, catching street scammers who worked three card Monte's and pigeon drops.

Lately, on the street, Dare had been hearing about a grifter who'd made big bucks and was about to make an even bigger score. And this score was already producing bodies. Just like old times.

Rumors had come back to him that the grifter was a woman. No way. This smacked of the professionalism and forethought of a man who'd dedicated his life to highpowered cons. Women usually played secondary roles in such operations. He had a lead on someone but so far she'd proved elusive. He'd get her though, he'd get the whole lot. He'd be the best damn Bunco man the DA had ever had and he'd do it without sucking up to anyone. He'd do it through good old-fashioned police work. It had worked in Homicide. It would work in Bunco.

Time to hit the street. He wanted to stay detached about Merkel's call but suddenly found himself bundling up his files. His failure to keep his paperwork tidy and up to date was a big complaint in the department, but right now he didn't give a damn. For the first time in six months he felt like he was working again. He grabbed his jacket off the coat rack.

"Leaving early, Stefanos?" Pete Hogan called. He was a freckle-faced Irishman with a tough attitude.

"Got to see a man about a dog," Dare mumbled without looking back. He knew he'd pissed Pete off, but he wasn't required to answer to him. Besides, he just plain didn't like the pushy Irish bastard.

Across town he parked his Mustang a couple of blocks away and hiked to the corner of Congress and First where police cars had blocked off the intersection. It was

one of the many neighborhoods that had not yet been rescued. Street lamps blinked against the encroaching night. The temperature had dropped and snow was predicted, but for now nothing softened the ragged edges of a blighted neighborhood. Old twostory framed houses with postage-stamp lawns, wire-fenced flowerbeds and hanging, plastic pots of listless petunias struggled to overcome the harsh truth of the hood's downward slide into hopeless poverty and crime. One or two of the houses had boarded windows, grassless driveways and a coterie of sharp-eyed lookouts who watched the street with more than usual interest. Crack houses.

The interest centered on the cop cars parked in front of the apartment house on the corner. Crime scene tape had been strung from lamp post to lamppost and onlookers crowded as close as they dared causing the tape to bow inward. Dare spotted a familiar face, a hooker who'd been one of his snitches in Homicide. She looked gaunt and used up. He nodded briefly and moved on to the scene of the crime.

A uniformed cop stopped him at the door but after seeing Dare's badge, directed him up the stairs to a bedroom. Several men were in the room. Most were concentrating on the naked dead man slumped on the floor at the foot of a bed. Merkel, along with a couple of other detectives, was down on his knees beside the body. One of them, a heavy-set, balding man with glasses and a doctor's bag, stood up and pulled off a pair of latex gloves. Dare recognized him instantly. Dr. Joseph White looked up and his big face broke into a grin.

"Hey, Stefanos, long time no see. How ya' been?"

"Fine, doc. How about you?"

The Medical Examiner shrugged and began tossing his instruments back into his bag. "Same old, same old. Miss seeing you around the scene."

"Yeah." Dare glanced at Merkel. The homicide detective had been the one to contact him, so Dare planned to let him call the shots, for now anyway.

Merkel held out a hand, his gaze direct. Dare hesitated only a moment before taking it.

"I'm glad you came down," the homicide detective said.

"Tell me what you've got." Dare squatted down to look at the corpse. "How long's he been dead?"

Merkel looked at the ME.

"I'd say more than twelve hours. Sometime in the wee hours of morn, he drew his last breath," White said.

"And a mighty fine breath it was, I'm a thinking," Merkel said quietly. "Do you know him?"

Dare hesitated. His involvement could end right here and now, but he couldn't risk being caught out in a lie later. "Like you said, a two-bit scammer who got picked up more often than not. He just wasn't any good at it."

"Got a name for him?"

Dare stared into the dead man's face. "Pepe."

"Got a last name?"

"Pepe Cosimero."

"Was he one of your snitches?"

"Not mine." Dare was glad he hadn't had to lie yet. "What's the thinking?"

"That he pissed someone off. Death was a shot to the back of the head."

"An execution, like you said."

"Could be, but the crime scene reads something else." Dare looked into Merkel's eyes. "Besides the shot to the head, he was nearly smothered to death and I wonder if the weapon was registered," Merkel joked and Dare stood up, moving around the room. Plastic bags of evidence had been stashed temporarily on a scarred bureau top. One held black silk cloth that had once been a dress. Dare flicked the bag with his finger. "Classy."

"Too classy for a joint like this." Merkel moved over to the bureau. "I keep asking myself, why would a dame who dresses like that be fooling with a dope like this?" He nodded toward the corpse. "It just don't figure, unless she was working the streets."

"I haven't seen him on the streets much. That's not his scene." Dare walked back to the bed. "Of course, I've only been on Bunco for less than six months, but I've heard a little bit about him. He's said to be a gun for hire. He'll do anything for anybody for a buck. He never works the same area twice without some delay time between."

Dare studied the facial wounds. "Those look pretty nasty. You sure they're not the cause of death?" He glanced at Merkel, caught a grin and bit back one himself. As a young homicide detective he'd quickly come to understood macabre, irreverent humor was a necessary vent in the face of the gruesome crime scenes being investigated.

"Anything that was his specialty?" Merkel asked.

Dare shrugged. "Not anything with much finesse. Basically he bilked old ladies with one scheme or another and if that didn't work, he beat them to death. Sometimes, he did that anyway, just because he could. Looks like someone caught up with him."

"We're ready to move the body, gentlemen," the ME said. "Anything more you want to look at?"

Merkel glanced at Dare questioningly and nodded. "Go ahead, Doc."

A gurney was brought in and the dead man placed in a rubber body bag and rolled out. Dare moved to the bed and studied the ropes that had been used as a restraint for someone. A dot of color caught his eye and he bent to study the corner of the mattress. A small rose-red crescent was caught in the ticking.

"You got something here," he told Merkel.

Cursing, the homicide detective brought out a plastic evidence bag and a pair of long tongs. "Damn young kids. You can't depend on them. You always did have a good eye." He dropped the crescent into the bag and held it to the light. Dare didn't say anything. It wasn't his place to teach Merkel his job.

"Looks like a broken fingernail," the detective mumbled. "Looks like she fought or —" He lowered the bag and looked at the iron pipe head board. "She was tied up and didn't want to be so she worked to get herself free. He came in and caught her, but she kicked the shit out of him and took off. Hey, Doc," he called after the departing ME. Dr. White rubbed his forehead wearily and looked back. "Tell me again the approximate time of death?"

White took off his glasses and dangled them while he stared into space and contemplated. "Like I told you, the wee hours of the morning, maybe twelve hours ago. Something like that." The ME nodded and put his glasses back on.

"Thanks, Doc," Merkel called after the departing figure and turned back to Dare. "She worked her ropes loose, murdered her captor and escaped." He walked to the door and back. Dare was reminded of Columbo. All Merkel needed was the raincoat and a cigar.

"Where'd she get the gun?"

"Damned if I know, but that's the way I read it." Merkel raked a hand through thinning hair and looked around.

"You going to check for any reports of rape?" Dare asked. Old habits were hard for him to break.

"We did when we first got here." Merkel sighed. "Lots of rapes go unreported."

"Not much chance this one will come in now. Especially when she's killed him."

Merkel looked at Dare. "That's about it. We need an ear to the ground. Want to give us a hand? It could go a long way toward getting you ba-"

"Don't promise what you can't deliver, Merk. But I'll ask around and give you a call." Dare headed toward the door.

"Yeah, you do that," he heard Merk say as if he didn't expect much help. Let him worry, Dare figured. He didn't owe the whole god damn department anything.

Outside the crowd had thinned, but that familiar face was still present. Some of the police cars had been reassigned and the cops had interviewed all they planned to for the moment. Dare walked away from the apartment building and leaned against the pole of a burnt out streetlight. Lighting a cigarette, he drew the smoke into his lungs and waited. A half-moon rode low in the sky, casting deep shadows and gilding the reality of the ruined neighborhood. For a moment, staring at the orange crescent Dare could almost believe the world was a beautiful place.

It took her a while to work her way around to him. She took a circuitous route, pretending not to be aimed where she obviously was. She sidled up to him. He could smell her body and her perfume. Both had seen better days. She wore too much makeup which didn't cover the years or the self-abuse. She was hard around the edges, only the dark liquid eyes revealing the soft center that miraculously still existed.

"Hey, Darey," she said in a slurred, wheezing voice that spoke of too many cigarettes and too much whiskey. The years hadn't been kind to her.

"Hi, Patti. How've you been?"

"I've seen better days." Her tone wasn't bitter, just matter-of-fact.

"Sorry to hear that."

She shrugged. "That's life. She killed him, didn't she?"

"Who?"

"The woman they brought here last night. I knew the moment I saw her, they was up to no good. A woman like that—" She shook her head and turned to him. "Give me a puff, will you, Dare?" She held out her hand for his lit cigarette.

He handed it over. "Keep it."

"Thanks, lover." She drew in a deep breath, held it then slowly exhaled, her blurred features expressing as much ecstasy as a two-hundred-dollar-a-day user with a dishpan of coke.

"Tell me about the woman," he said.

"What's to tell? She was small and classy, like she didn't have to worry about where the next..." Patti bit her lip. "Meal is coming from."

Or the next drink or the next hit. Dare didn't say it. "So, she didn't look like she belonged around here?"

"Naw, she sure sounded like it though. She could swear better'n anyone I know but in a snooty polite Grosse Pointe kind of voice. You know what I mean?"

"Did they mention her name?"

"Naw, they were too busy trying to get her hustled inside before anyone could see her and before she kicked 'em to death."

"Looks like she might have. Had you seen her before?"

Patti shook her head and took a final nervous puff from the cigarette. "Look, Dare, I never paid you back for what you done for me with Boyd."

"It's ancient history. Forget it."

"Well, I was thinking I could pay you back in... Well, in business."

"That's not necessary, Patti."

"I'm clean, Dare. I never take a John unless he wears a condom and I don't share needles with anyone. I take good care of myself. I have to in my trade."

"Yeah, Patti, I know you do, but I've got me a girl and..." He let the lie slide away from him. She chortled low in her throat and slid to her knees.

"This won't hurt you none, babe," she said and her hands quickly unzipped his pants.

"Jesus, Patti, what are you doing?"

"It's dark, no one's looking." Her hands were busy on him, but he reached down and pulled her to her feet.

"How much do you need, Patti?" he asked. "I'll float you a loan."

She smiled. "You're a good man, Dare love. Twenty'll do me for that, baby, but if you have a fifty, that would be better."

"I can give you a twenty."

"For fifty, I can give you the name of the woman they brought in here. Word on the street is that she did the killing."

"I thought you said you didn't know her."

Patti smiled enigmatically. "I didn't before, but when I was down on my knees, I remembered."

Dare handed her a fifty. "Her name is Billie and she lives in a building down by the arena. Don't look at the skyscrapers, baby, cause she ain't there. The building's small like she is." Patti laughed and walked away.

Dare watched her go, wondering if her tip was reliable. You could never quite trust a druggie. Out of the darkness came laughter, cynical and knowing.

"So, that's how you work your snitches," Merkel said, stepping out of the shadows. "I've often wondered how you got information the rest of us couldn't."

"It's wasn't what it seemed. I turned her down."

"Yeah, I noticed." Phil lit a cigarette, offered him one and put the battered pack back in his pocket. "How long's it been since Leeann walked out?"

"You know, god damn well it's been six months, ever since all that bullshit with Boyd happened."

"She hurt you by leaving like that. A lot of people figured she knew you were dirty or she wouldn't have left."

"Naw, she was having a thing with an insurance agent. As soon as she got the divorce, she married him and they moved out to Arizona."

"That's what I heard." He flicked the ash from his cigarette. "Tough on you and the boy."

Dare didn't say anything. What was there to say? He'd lost more than his position in Homicide, he'd lost ready access to his kid as well.

"Did the whore give you any information we can use?"

"Don't call her that," Dare said tightly.

"Jeez, I'm sorry. What I meant to say was did the *lady* give us anything we can use?"

Dare shook his head. "Not a thing." He felt no guilt about the lie. Pattie was *his* snitch, besides he wasn't sure her tip was any good.

"You gave her money." Merk was looking at him oddly.

Dare forced a grim smile and decided to throw his old friend a curve. Moving down the street toward his car, he called over his shoulder, "No matter how pretty I may be, pal, the women still want to get paid, whether they're whores or respectable married women."

"Hey, man, you've gotten bitter," Merkel said.

Dare didn't answer, just kept walking until he got back to his Mustang. A small woman named Billie who lived in a short building near Cobo Arena. Not a lot to go on, but enough.

## **Chapter Two**

By ten o'clock the next morning, the locksmith had come and gone. Her domain was secure again. Her credit cards had been canceled and replacements were on the way. Dressed in a navy business suit with no adornment and a microskirt, Billie descended to her first-floor office determined to finish the pile of paperwork she'd been ignoring. By day she was a legitimate business woman, head of her own accounting firm. By night, she was something else entirely and that paid bigger bucks than anything she could do legally. But she was too angry and worried to concentrate, so she took out a pad and tried to work out what had happened the night before.

She knew who had ordered her kidnapping and his plans for her had been a permanent disappearing act. If his men hadn't gotten horny, she might be wearing a brand-new pair of concrete shoes right now while trying to negotiate the Detroit River without a boat.

She'd been lucky this time, but she couldn't count on that happening again. Besides, she'd always believed you make your own luck. Her thoughts went back to the problem at hand and how it had all started.

Three months before she'd managed to key into Sam Udall's private account and skim nearly a half million from his investments before he discovered the embezzlement. She'd had little doubt once he discovered the theft, he would order the responsible party killed. He was that kind of man, but the gain had been worth the risk in her estimation. Besides, she was good enough at what she did, she figured he'd never uncover who had robbed him. Just to make sure she had a backup plan.

Udall had been one of the richest and most influential men in the state. If he hadn't had such an unsavory past, he might have made governor, hell, even president of the whole country, but on his way to making his fortune, he'd taken a few shortcuts neither party wanted to turn a blind eye to, so he'd had to content himself with running things from behind the scenes. Mayors, governors and state senators acquiesced to his every wish. That kind of power was hard to fight.

Someone had found a way. They'd blown him away in his own home while he was getting a blowjob from a state senator's exquisitely blonde, barely of age, college-bound daughter who liked living on the wild side. That should have been an unexpected bonus for Billie. With Udall dead, she shouldn't have had to worry about her little scam being discovered. Just one problem. She'd seen the killing and could identify the shooter.

She'd been there in Sam Udall's high-priced mansion, working his high-powered computer, trying to erase any possible trace he might have that would lead to her. The storms that blew through that night could have easily disrupted his internet, and she

wasn't about to chance her program being aborted before it erased all evidence of her. He was supposed to be at an AIDS Benefit Charity affair, but he'd come home early. She'd just popped in the mother of all discs, the boot and nuke, when she heard them in the foyer. She hit the enter button and headed for a nearby closet.

From her hiding place, she'd observed everything, from the dull hollow thud of shots being fired to Udall and his eager nymphet falling to the Aubusson carpet together as if in the throes of passion, his hands still clamping her blonde head to his crotch, his cock still in her exquisite, candy-pink-lipsticked mouth. The expression on his face had been one of astonished disbelief.

She knew because when the shooter left, she'd crept out of the closet to stare with her own disbelief at their entwined bodies—Sam's well-muscled but running to middleaged fat, the senator's daughter's sleek and tanned with an athlete's body and full, improbable augmented breasts. Billie had felt a rage rise within her, but her own danger drew her away from the bodies.

Sam Udall had been double-crossed by his second-in-command, Charlie Sweet, who ran everything from prostitution, money laundering and drugs to some of the more lucrative of Udall's enterprises. She had hunkered down to wait until the coast was clear and when she'd thought they were gone, she'd eased down the curving stairs, her feet silent on the carpeted steps.

She'd just reached the bottom when Sweet, himself, rounded the corner. They were rifling Udall's house trying to make it look like a robbery gone bad. He'd been as astonished as she was. She'd expected to feel a bullet any moment, but instead he'd shouted for his men.

She'd bolted for the door and been chased two blocks to the side street where she'd left her bright yellow Mustang convertible. A barrage of shots had been fired after her, ripping the canvas top to shreds. She'd known then she'd have to get rid of the car. It would give her away as nothing else would. She'd ditched it down by the river near the bridge and for the first time in her life called the city police and reported it stolen.

In the days that followed the killing she'd tried to stay off the street until she could figure out what to do. She'd even contemplated leaving Detroit then dismissed the idea. This was her town, her territory. There must be a way to get out of the fix she was in.

A pounding at the door startled her. Slowly, she rose from her desk chair, flicked off the light and slid out into the hall to peer around a wall of the reception area. Beyond the windows, the streets were dark with an oily sheen cast by streetlights on wet pavement. A light rain had started to fall. A man stood outside on the sidewalk. He looked tough, mean even. Probably a cop.

He saw her and motioned her to open up. She played dumb, shaking her head to indicate she wasn't open. He persisted. She knew the kind. He'd never go away unless he got what he wanted. But what the hell could he want from her? She bit her lip, hesitating, then decided.

"We're closed. It's after office hours," she said, opening the door an inch. Now she could see him better and absently noted a scar that cut across his lower lip and down his chin. Still, he was attractive, tall and dark, his face rugged. The shoulders of his cheap suit were filled nicely and she bet his trousers were filled just as nicely.

He waited silently while she made her perusal.

"See anything you like?" he asked, grinning. He stepped closer, the movement raw and challenging in its power ploy.

"I told you we're closed."

"I'm not looking to buy your services, Billie," he said, but his gaze said otherwise. He was in the market all right for what she wasn't selling. He stuck the toe of a black loafer in the door. She braced her small frame to keep him from any further intrusion. Her short skirt slid up revealing a good portion of thigh and he leered.

"What do you want?" she demanded, scowling. "And how do you know my name?"

"I do my homework. I just want to talk," he said, tearing his gaze away from her anatomy. His dark gaze caught hers, bold and challenging and totally unyielding.

"What about?" she asked, trying to sound as tough as he looked.

"Let me in and I'll explain. Here." He held up a badge. "I'm a cop." His expression was implacable.

"Is this the way cops question honest citizens?" she demanded without yielding one inch.

"If we have to. Open up."

"Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin," she quipped. He shoved, hard and fast, catching her unawares so she flew backward and sprawled on the floor. Her skirt flew up, the hem nesting in her crotch.

"Nice view," he commented.

"You son of a bitch," she raged, jumping to her feet and extracting a tiny stiletto she kept hidden in the top of her stockings. She flew at him, the weapon raised, ready to cut out his black heart.

He sidestepped her onrush, took hold of her wrist and twisted so the stiletto fell from her nerveless fingers and she was caught in his iron grip, her back against the solid wall of his chest, her derriere nestled against his crotch. She felt his cock harden and push against her and she struggled, but he held fast.

"If you really are a cop, I'll call your superior and have you on suspension so fast, you won't be able to snap your shorts," she threatened. "What's your name and badge number?"

"I'm asking the questions here. Tell me your full name."

"Bastard, if you don't know who I am, why did you attack me? What do you want with me? Let go."

"Not until I'm sure you don't have some other little surprise hidden in your stockings, Billie." He jerked her around so now she faced him, although she was still pressed as tightly to his hard body as before and this time, she felt his arousal grind against her belly. His hands surged over her body thoroughly and completely, searching for additional weapons. He grinned. He was liking this.

"You want to do a cavity search too?" she snapped.

"I'm willing, if you are." His dark eyes held humorous lights.

"You bastard cop," she cried, outraged. "I'll kill you if you try to touch me again."

"Like you killed Pepe Cosimero?"

"I don't know who you're talking about," she said, growing still for a moment. She had an inkling. He stepped back from her, pushing his dark hair off his forehead.

"I think you do," he said quietly. "I need some answers, Billie, and I need them now."

"Go to hell," she cried and broke away from him, running back toward her office. Darkness had fallen over the city and the lower level of her building lay in shadows. He was right behind her; she could hear the thud of his shoes against the floor. His hand closed over her shoulder in a cruel grip that made her cry out with pain.

He threw her backward. She collided with the wall hard enough to jolt the breath from her body. For a moment she leaned, struggling to draw in air, then he was on her, his hands hard as they gripped her arms and pinned them against the wall above her head. He let the solid weight of his body trap her so she couldn't struggle against him. She felt the heat and tensile strength of his body. Her breasts flattened against his chest, his pelvis ground against her, his arousal was complete now, hard and turgid against her mound.

She felt a betraying surge of desire and screamed her frustration. She'd never given in willingly to rape and she wouldn't now. She'd killed the last man who tried. She'd kill this one. She bucked against him, but he rode her back against the wall and in that moment, something changed in the way he held her and the way she responded to him. She sensed it and shook her head wildly against the changing emotions. Though he still held her tightly, his clasp no longer hurt her.

His hands were large so one was all that was needed to hold her wrists above her head. He was leaning into her, breathing hard, his dark gaze studying her face. Their breath intermingled, their gazes caught and held. He moved against her slightly, the motion less punitive, more seductive. His gaze still holding hers, he slowly lowered his free hand and ran it over the curve of her breast.

In their struggle her jacket had come undone and the only thing between his flesh and hers was a thin silk camisole. The full roundness of her breast rested in his palm as if it had come home. She felt her nipple harden, felt the answering tingle between her legs. Her thighs twitched to part. Time stood still, went backward to some more fundamental evolution where all that mattered was a man and a woman wanting each other. But she didn't want to want him, didn't want this raw sexuality between them. She fought him and felt her sexual need implode within her.

She forgot everything, the danger she was in, Charlie Sweet, who wanted her too, but wanted to kill her. She wanted this man with an urgency that stunned her, especially after the near rape the night before or maybe because of it. But she was Billie Stone and she decided who and when. She controlled who touched her intimately and she paid for what she wanted so she could maintain that control. Now she whimpered deep in her throat and longed to feel him inside her and the longing and wanting made her fight him even more, her nails raking at him. His mouth captured hers and he thrust into her with his tongue. She slashed back, tasting him, wanting him, denying her want.

She struggled to free her hands, but this time to feel him, to unzip his slacks and take that magnificent hard cock into her hands and roll it between her fingers. She wanted to feel the heat of it. A naked lust made her lean against him harder and he responded by pressing himself into her. She relaxed her stance, letting him push closer against her wet and aching cunt.

Through the thin silk, he rolled the nipple of one breast between his fingers, pinching slightly, caressing away the pleasure-pain and then doing it all over again until she arched her back so her breasts were more accessible to him.

"Let me go," she whispered shakily.

"I can't," he said. "You've threatened to kill an officer of the law."

"I want to touch you," she said as his hand flattened over her breast then squeezed until once again she arched against him. "I won't try to kill you," she promised, her eyes closed, her breath coming in short gasps.

"Promise?" He released her hands, although his body still held her captive. Slowly, he slid his hands down the sides of her breasts and he moved lazily, as if enjoying the moment, as he pulled up the thin camisole. The movement of silk against her engorged nipples was even more erotic. He dipped his head and drew a nipple into his mouth and she caught her breath, her hands threading through his glossy, black hair and raking over his shoulders to his back.

"Why do you want to talk to me?" she asked, moving her hands around to grasp his cock through the fabric of his slacks. It wasn't good enough. She tore at the zipper and felt it give way. Her hands were sure in their quest and suddenly, she had him there, hard and full and hot. He hadn't answered her question, but suddenly it wasn't too important.

"Fuck me," she said hoarsely, overwhelmed with the need to experience sex in a pleasurable way rather than the near rape of the night before.

"I can't. I'm an officer of the law," he teased and made no effort to let up the assault on her sensuality.

"Fuck me," she repeated, a demand this time. She threw herself at him, the momentum carrying them to the other side of the hallway, so now his back was up against the wall. Her lips met his and they kissed hungrily as if they'd known and desired each other for a long time. She tore at his shirt, ripping buttons open. She heard the zing as a couple of them hit the wall. His chest was bare to her, a mat of dark hair covering his muscles and flesh, narrowing as it grew over his flat stomach and lower to the nest of hair cushioning his genitalia. His penis was long and rock hard, the bulbous tip smooth and hot and pink. His cock bobbed at her, teasingly.

They were on their knees now. He had pulled her skirt up around her waist and pushed her thong panties out of his way. He kneaded her buttocks, grasping and pinching and massaging until she gasped. His hand moved in her crotch, parting the hair, caressing and rubbing the lips and the button of her clitoris.

Electric shocks raced along her thighs, taking away her strength until she sank to the carpet. His hand followed, unrelenting, knowing and devastating. His fingers explored inside and out, touching, now soft, now harder, more urgently, back and forth until she felt her climax coming and moaned a warning. Her hands moved on his cock, back and forth, faster with the same urgency as his hands moved over her. She lifted her hips and spread her legs, wanting to be more open to him. He rose and straddled her, his cock hard and ready. Cursing, he reached into his wallet and pulled out a condom. She wanted to scream at him for the delay, but a part of her applauded his action.

He plunged, taking no time to be gentle. Nor did she want him gentle. The anger and frustration of the past few hours made her react with her own aggression, so she pulled him into herself. She felt him, long and hard, rubbing the throbbing walls of her vagina. She clenched against him and heard his exclamation of denial. Not yet.

She forced herself to relax, to hold back waiting for the next swell of tremors to build. He was pumping against her now, hard and steady, with building tension. She felt the first wave of a climax claiming her. She gave in to the tremors that shook her, the need for more that made her jerk her body in an orgasmic spasm that left her unable to breath. The smell of hot, smoking sex rose around them, an aphrodisiac that drove her farther over the edge.

Above her, his weight braced on the muscular column of his arms as he hammered at her, his hard cock driving into her hot, willing flesh. She mewed with need and tightened against him. He hollered and shuddered, his hot semen rushing into the condom.

They lay entwined, sweating and breathless, in a tangle of discarded clothes. Finally, he raised his head and looked at her. "I'm glad to meet you, Billie. I'm Dare Stefanos."

## \* \* \* \* \*

What do you say to a cop after you've fucked him?

Billie sat on the floor and stared at Dare Stefanos. She had a gun in her desk drawer. She could kill him. But that thought passed as quickly as it came.

"What do you want with me?" she asked, sitting up to pull on her panties. She found one of her high heels and slipped it on and stood, teetering.

Dare remained silent, sitting on the floor. He leaned back against the wall and stared up at her, his dark eyes studying her so thoroughly, she finally squirmed and repeated her question.

"What about Pepe Cosimero?" he asked finally.

"I don't know him."

"I heard you do." He got to his feet and stood facing her. "I heard Pepe and some of his friends kidnapped you and hauled you to a place down on Congress and First. What'd they do? Rape you or were they friends until you got pissed off and gave Pepe a kick in the eye with one of your shoes?" He held up the stiletto heel she hadn't been able to find.

"I don't know what you're talking about." She grabbed the shoe from him and leaned against the wall to pull it on. No matter how she stalled though, she knew she'd have to meet his gaze. His eyes were narrowed, quicksilver and dark with mistrust. Anger flared.

"How can you fuck me one minute and look at me with so much suspicion the next?" she asked and arranged her skirt with an intentional swish that showed a lot of thigh. He straightened from his own stance against the wall and zipped up his pants with an air of finality that left her a little disappointed. This little escapade was a mistake and should not be repeated, she reminded herself.

Dare looked chagrined. "One thing has nothing to do with the other," he answered, shoving his blue-black hair back with a wide hand. He fixed her with his gaze and studied her like a mad scientist looking through a microscope at some rare bug that would cure all the ills of present day society.

"Well," he said with a touch of impatience, "tell me what you know about Pepe."

"I told you I don't know a Pepe." *Which wasn't a lie since she hadn't known any of the names of her attackers.* "Is he Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban?" She shrugged. "Is he an illegal? You know a bunch of bad people are coming into the states these days."

"He may be all of the above," Dare said tersely. "For sure, he's a mean son of a bitch whose services are for hire to the highest bidder, no request too far outside the law to be refused. He's especially fond of kidnapping, raping and killing his victims, male or female."

"He sounds like a pretty bad character." She folded her arms over her breasts and assumed an air of curiosity. "But as you can see he's not hiding out here. Oh, but that's right. You said someone had killed him. Why would you think that I, a law-abiding businesswoman, would have anything to do with a thug like that?"

Still holding her gaze, he stepped forward and grabbed her hand, his glance dipped and his thumb brushed across her broken nails.

"Looks like you've done some rough work here, like trying to escape a knotted rope."

"I have no idea what you're talking about and I'm not into kinky sex play like bondage and S&M. I like my fucking straight up." She gave him a flirtatious grin over her shoulder. "You should know that."

He jerked her around, his grip hard on her shoulder. "Okay, Billie, you've had your fun, but it takes more than a little sex to deter me."

"That's a pity," she purred, rubbing her body against his. "And we were so good together. She let her hand drop to his crotch and laughed when she found him full and hard again. "A pity for both of us."

She straightened then and stepped away from him. "Get out, Dare Stefanos," she ordered. "Unless you have an arrest or a search warrant, you shouldn't even be here, so get out before I call your superior."

He eyed her thoughtfully. "All right." He straightened his tie and tucked in his shirt. "But don't be deterred by this little episode. The story on the street is that Pepe and the other two thugs were looking for you and I hear the word is out on you, Billie. You're going to be hamburger meat in a few hours unless you tell me who wants you dead."

"Oh, so you came here to protect me," she sneered. "Well, thanks anyway. I can take care of myself."

"Can you?" His gaze wandered up and down her figure. "I hope so. I'd hate to see them zipping you in a body bag. Who did you piss off, Billie?"

"Get out," she said leading the way toward the reception area again.

"Did you ever wonder how I found you?" He followed along at a leisurely pace. "Or how long it will take your friends to find out where you are?"

They were at the door now and Billie threw it open for him and stood aside. "Don't worry about me," she snapped. "I've been taking care of myself since I was seven years old. I don't need you or Detroit's finest, given one can be found."

He paused in the doorway, his hands in his pockets, his expression calculating. "You did call Detroit's finest a few days ago about your car. Where was it stolen from?"

"I have no idea. It was stolen. Maybe they took it from my garage or from the street, I don't remember." She was anxious now and wanted him gone. She felt too exposed here in the open doorway. She cast a quick glance at the street and ducked back a little. His chiseled mouth curved in a cynical smile.

"Feeling afraid, Billie?"

"No, I just want you to go now. Now!" She crossed her arms and glared at him, chin tipped high, eyes narrowed.

He stepped through the door and turned back to her. "A vehicle matching your car's description was seen racing away from Sam Udall's neighborhood out in Grosse

Pointe three nights ago. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"I can't remember being anywhere near Grosse Pointe. Maybe whoever stole it drove it out there."

"Maybe. I'm sorry to tell you, shots were fired at it so I don't imagine you'll get it back without some damage."

She feigned disgust. "Well, there you have it. A perfect example of police effectiveness. You don't keep the hoodlums off the street but you come harass innocent, law-abiding citizens."

"Are you?"

"What?"

"Innocent and law-abiding?"

"Goodbye, Detective Stefanos," she said and shut the door in his face.

Alone again, she looked around the office. Stefanos had made valid points. She was clearly targeted for extermination by a dangerous killer who wouldn't hesitate to hunt her down. She needed to go underground and the best place to do that was to go to the top. Hurrying now, she locked the front door and set about erasing all the files on her computer, frustrated at the time it took. When they were done, she hurried to the back and checked the lock on the steel door that opened onto the alley and found the locksmith had left it open. Shaking her head with dismay, she made her way up to the second floor. A thick steel door had been installed there as well, her second reinforcement against invasion and she grinned to hear it slam behind her. On the third landing, she had her final defense with a four-inch steel door. It shut behind her, securing her inside but as an added precaution, she'd installed a steel bar which she now lowered into place. It would take a Sherman tank to tear that down. She set the alarm and gave a sigh of relief.

Talk about panic rooms, how about a panic floor? She'd planned it this way. There were no windows up here, only skylights, where steel slats closed at the flick of a switch. No fire escapes, no exits and entrances except through that barred door at the top of the stairs and one secret trap only she knew about, as a precaution in case of fire. Her pantry was filled with enough food to keep her a year if need be and she had a PC as well and her laptop, so business could continue pretty much as it always had.

Just no one would know where she'd gone. She'd be hiding under their very noses. She chuckled, delighted with her foresight and kicked off her heels. Rain spat on the skylights intensifying her sense of isolation. Shaking herself free of such maudlin thoughts, she stripped off her suit and stepped into the shower.

She soaped herself, spreading the suds into every crevice of her body, feeling the tender flesh from her encounter with Dare Stefanos. He'd been a great fuck, better than Carlos, even.

She wouldn't deign to even think of Pepe Cosimero who had tried to rape her the night before. His efforts had been so pathetic as to be ludicrous. That was not to

minimize the bastard's actions. Billie personally believed no woman should be taken against her will. Anger, white hot and long burning, was the worst she'd carried away from the encounter, but there would be other attempts on her life.

She shrugged the memory of Pepe aside. He was dead. He'd gotten his just rewards. She concentrated instead on the waves of sensations rolling over her. Her fingers slid into the silky hair at her mound, parting her lips until they reached the nub of her clitoris. She gasped at the pleasure that washed through her. She'd masturbated before, but now her body seemed fully sensitized so each stroke, each movement brought intense excitement. She thought of Dare Stefanos and wished he were present here in the shower with her, pressing his big, hard cock into her backside. They'd only touched the tip of the iceberg in what happened between two people and she had a good idea he was well versed in all the gambits along the way.

Her hands moved faster against her clitoris, brushing against its sensitive tip then away then back again in a rhythmic pattern that made her muscles tighten. To slow down her reaction, she brushed her fingers over the lips that protected her femininity, then took the shower hose down and washed away all the soap. Lifting one leg to the side of the tub, she turned the dial on the showerhead to a jet stream which came out in a single forceful flush of water. When she sprayed it across her clitoris, her legs jerked with the sensation of it.

The shower was filled with steam now, her face was flushed and moist, her skin hot, her body flexible. She adjusted her knee so the stream of water could hit more directly and arched with the sensations that washed through her as the warm water bombarded her sensitive nub. She could feel herself coming and moaned, gasping for air. The intensity of the climax was stronger than anything she'd ever experienced before by herself and when she was able to breathe again, she reasoned that Dare Stefanos must have had something to do with this increased pleasure she was experiencing.

For the dozenth time, she wished he were here, locked into her fortress with her, her personal playboy to while away the hours with. She chuckled at the thought of a proud, macho man like Stefanos being her play stud.

When her heart had slowed its beat so she could walk, she stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself in a thick, white terry robe, twisted a matching terry towel around her head and padded into her bedroom.

Something was wrong.

Startled, she halted, half crouching, wishing to hell she hadn't left her revolver in her handbag in the kitchen. Her gaze fixed on the dark shadow that rested on her chaise lounge. The shape looked vaguely familiar and she strained to see the face. She liked knowing who was about to kill her.

"How did you get up here?" she asked harshly, stalling while her gaze darted around the room. Her dresser was to the left of her and buried within the silken depths of the top drawer was a pistol. She gauged whether she could make it before a bullet

took her out. She had a veritable arsenal buried in her closet. She just had to get to it. She let her robe fall open a little bit and took a step forward. After all, she'd managed to outwit Sweet's men once before. Maybe she could again. She glanced around, trying to appear casual.

"Are you alone?" she asked, making her voice soft and breathless and letting her robe gape open so he could see the shadows of pale hair at her crotch and the curve of her full breasts. Perhaps she could divert the attention of her intruder and get the upper hand with him.

The figure stirred so the light fell on his face and she recognized the rough, handsome features of Dare Stefanos. Assured now that she wasn't about to be assassinated, anger coursed through her. Never mind that she'd just been wishing him here, the point was, he wasn't supposed to be. She straightened and tightened her robe.

"Dare Stefanos," she snapped.

"That sounded like an interesting shower, Billie," he said mildly.

"What the hell are you doing in my bedroom and how did you get in here?" She swung around in irritation to check the door at the top of the landing. It was still closed and barred.

"Oh, yes, your security system," he said, getting to his feet and hitching up his pants in a timeless masculine gesture. "Impressive." He shook his head. "I can't imagine Fort Knox having a better one."

"Obviously not good enough, if you got in," she said, going to her lingerie drawer and digging out the pistol she kept there. She checked to see it was loaded, thumbed off the safety and slipped out onto the landing. The steel door was secure. She turned her attention to the skylights, moving swiftly now in her urgency through each and every room. Not one of them was disturbed. Finally she made her way back to the landing where Dare Stefanos waited.

"Okay, Houdini, how'd you get in?" she demanded, keeping her gun at the ready. He might be handsome and a good fuck, but he might also be a crooked cop who was on Sweet's payroll.

"Don't get your britches in a snitch," he said lightly and raised an eyebrow. "That's right, you don't have any on yet."

Her lips thinned warningly but he didn't appear to be intimidated.

"I got in before you barricaded yourself up here," he explained with a shrug of his shoulders.

"But I threw you out myself."

"And I simply went to the back door and let myself in again. I was—reconnoitering in your closet when I heard you start locking up."

Damn that locksmith. Billie figured she was lucky no one else had decided to wander in. "Why didn't you let me know you were here?" she asked with some exasperation.

"I wasn't sure what you had in mind, Billie. I thought I'd stick around and find out. That's quite a system you've got there."

"I like to be prepared."

"That's a smart attitude when you've got Charlie Sweet pissed off at you."

"I don't know the gentleman."

"Sure you do. Everyone in town knows Charlie and what he's capable of. Pepe Cosimero was one of his hired guns."

"You know far more than I do about this Sweet character," she said over her shoulder as she moved toward the kitchen with the thought of making coffee. In the back of her mind she was wondering how the hell she was going to get Dare Stefanos out of her hiding place without giving herself away. The answer was, she couldn't. He knew way more about her than he needed to know and she wasn't certain he wouldn't spread the word around. Carlos! She stopped mid-stride. She'd forgotten the little Salsa stud. What were the chances that he'd talk to Charlie Sweet? Practically nil, she told herself, but wasn't sure. *Shit*!

"You look worried, Billie," Stefanos was at her side. He followed her to the kitchen and perched on a stool. "You got more problems than you thought. You want to share them with me? Maybe I can help."

"Thanks, but I've got all my bases covered." She filled the coffeepot.

His gaze slid down her terry draped figure to her bare thighs. "Yeah, I guess you have."

"Disappointed?"

He grinned wolfishly and moved around the island until he was standing close enough so she could feel his heat. She closed her eyes, remembering how raw and powerful their fucking had been and suddenly she knew as certainly as she was standing here in her kitchen that they'd do it again before the night was out, maybe within the hour. His hand clamped on her shoulder and spun her around. His gaze was riveted on her lips and he leaned his head down to nuzzle the corner of her mouth.

She held still, letting him take the initiative, something she seldom did. She liked to be in charge in everything. Carlos had learned and quickly complied. She guessed Stefanos never would. For now, she was content not to do battle. She was tired and looking forward to another pleasant sexual encounter of the kind she liked.

His large hands came up to position her head to give him better access, and she complied. Then his tongue, raspy and hot, laved her lips, slipping between them to stroke then subdue. His taste filled her mouth, sexy and hot and spicy and oh, so masculine. He kissed her long and deep, his tongue moving, stroking, drawing from her every sensation a kiss should elicit. He hadn't even touched the rest of her and she was already hot and panting. She reached for him, but encountered his belt buckle and zipper. Expertly, she cleared that, pushing his pants down over his hips so they fell to the floor around his feet. His boxer shorts were next and then there he was, his cock hot

and throbbing. She gauged the length of his penis, the weight of his balls, enjoying the prickle of coarse pubic hair in her warm, sensitive palm.

He'd abandoned her mouth and moved his attentions down to her breasts. Shoving aside the thick terry cloth, he bent to nibble, then lifted her under her armpits and set her butt squarely on the edge of the counter, parting her legs and stepping in against her so she felt his hot, throbbing cock against her clitoris. She arched, increasing the contact and pumped against his hips, not so much to have him enter her as to increase the friction. She felt him, hard and demanding and unyielding against her flesh, the bulbous tip of his cock ramming against her clitoris with a fury that brought her almost immediately to a near climax.

"Wait," she whispered, but he pumped against her again and she thought she might shatter, but this time, it was he who took his penis in his hand, slipped a condom over it and brushed its tip across her lips, groaning his pleasure.

"No waiting," he grunted and this time he aimed his cock toward her soft, moist core. He slammed against her and she jerked with the impact, unable to speak for the delicious sensations flooding her. He withdrew and pushed against her again, his hands going behind her to cup her buttocks and bring her against him so the sensation was increased even more. He turned his head to gaze into her eyes and increased his pace, slamming into her so furiously their skin made slapping sounds that filled the room.

Billie felt warm and pliant in his hands. He'd pulled her buttocks completely off the counter and was supporting her weight while he pumped. She was impressed by his size and stamina. Her terry robe was hanging off her now so when she arched backward, resting her elbows on the counter to anchor herself more fully and thus participate herself, her full breasts were exposed, their soft fleshiness bouncing with the impact of each thrust.

She laughed and suddenly wanted to suckle herself. She took one in her hand and rolled the nipple between her fingers, moaning at the swell of pleasure. Dare's hands were occupied holding her, but he butted her hand aside and closed his teeth over her nipple. She gasped at the electrical pulse that shot through her body. Her muscles clasped his cock, spasms washing over her. He nibbled, letting his teeth rake across her sensitive nipple.

She reached between them, felt his cock ramming into her, felt the juices of her own cum lubricating their motions, then she found her clitoris and rubbed against it in rhythm to his every thrust. She felt it coming, felt the magnitude of her climax rushing over her, felt her body quivering, her clitoris bristling and swelling. She didn't have to be gentle. She pressed down hard against the button. There was pleasure-pain, slight and absolutely delicious causing her to shudder as Dare's thrusts grew faster and deeper. She heard him gasping as he released her breasts. Drawing in great drafts of air he pumped a final time. She felt him come, spilling his semen into her pussy.

Her climax made her clench against him with a ferocity that forced him to give up more of his semen. She held the clench as long as she could, savoring it, hating the feel of her orgasm sliding away from her. She hadn't recovered from it yet and she wanted more. Dare raised his head and looked into her eyes. She grinned at him, letting him see her renewed lust.

"Billie," he gasped. "You'll be the death of me."

# **Chapter Three**

Evil wore an old man's face with a leering smile and bad breath. Evil touched her with hands that were icy cold and damp. Evil was a voice that whispered and shushed her sobs and promised her pretty dollies and a puppy if she'd only be quiet and let him touch her. But Evil could be vanquished. All she had to do was scream and Evil went away and Mama came to stroke her hair and hum to her. In the end, Evil whispered lies and Mama left her at the Children's Home.

Still, when Evil came in her dreams, she screamed.

"Jesus Christ! Are you okay?" Dare Stefano's dark head loomed over her. The light was on. The darkness gone. Evil was gone. Mama was gone. She'd cried out against Evil and Dare had been there. She blinked her eyes and stared at him. For a brief moment she felt safe. Then the dream and its aftermath were gone.

She rolled onto her side away from him.

"Are you okay?" he asked again, placing his hand on her shoulder. She glanced back at him and found his eyes studying her, dark and puzzled. "Why did you scream like that?" he demanded, and when she didn't answer he shook her slightly, refusing to be ignored. "Tell me what happened."

"Nothing. I just had a dream," she muttered.

"That was one hell of a dream." He finally lay down beside her, cuddling her close to him. She wanted to push away from him, but "wan't" wasn't "do", so she lay stiff within his loose embrace.

"Do you need to talk about it?" he asked softly.

"Nothing to talk about." They lay like that, touching and yet not touching until after a while when she'd contrived to simulate slumber with long even breaths, he turned out the light and lay silent and stiff beside her. She could guess what he was doing, trying to figure her out, but no one had ever been able to do that. She kept herself to herself.

"I know what it's like to be scared," he said, his voice coming soft and even out of the darkness. "Maybe not scared like you -"

"I'm not scared."

"Why all the security then?"

"It's not fear, just caution."

"Right," he said in a tone that clearly implied he didn't believe her.

"I have enemies," she explained. "Preparing yourself against them doesn't denote fear, just wisdom."

"Like I said, uh-huh. So, you want to tell me about your enemies?"

"I can't."

"Tell me about your dreams then," he persisted.

"I...can't," she whispered and knew it was the little girl talking.

"Who are you, Billie? I don't even know your last name or where you came from."

"I thought you did your homework before you came looking for me."

"The only information I had was a small blonde woman named Billie who lived in a short building near Cobo. When I spotted your building, I acted on the spur of the moment. I didn't expect to even find you here."

"You lucked out."

"In more ways than one."

Their voices had slowed, grown softer. She could feel the heat of his body near hers and was comforted by it.

"So where do you go from here, Billie?" he asked after a considerable silence. "What are you going to do? Lock yourself away up here until whoever wants to kill you goes away?"

"I can stay up here for a year if I have to," she said. "I planned it that way."

"You won't make it."

"I know." For the first time she realized he was right. She'd never last here for a year, she'd go stir-crazy. Her memories alone would do her in.

"So what will you do?"

"I... We will stay here for a while and when I think it's clear we'll leave and you can go back to your job and I'll make a run for it, maybe set up in Chicago or L.A."

"You've got it all figured out."

"Mmm-hmm."

"What if I don't cooperate?"

"You don't have a choice." She knew that wasn't true. She sensed Dare Stefanos was not a man who left his choices to others.

"Look, I can help you because this won't work," he said. "Eventually, he'll find you."

"Who?"

"This man who wants to kill you."

"I'll work it out."

"You never give up, do you?"

"I was thinking the same about you."

"Okay, I get it, you're a tough lady who knows how to take care of herself. You don't need anyone and *you* decide what's best for you."

"You're damn right," she agreed, bouncing into a sitting position and turning to face him. "I am a tough lady and don't you ever forget it. You know why? Do you want to know why? Because I've had to be tough my whole life long. I never knew my daddy, maybe God knows. I'm not sure even my mother did." She turned on him, venting her anger, the anger that always came after the dream.

"I was put into a Children's Home when I was seven because Mama's sugar daddy had a thing for little girls. She said she was protecting me, but you know what, she forgot to come back for me. She wanted his money more than she wanted me, so I've never had anyone to depend on but myself." She threw up her hands. "But don't shed tears for me. I'm not crying. I learned early how to be tough, how to survive and yes, how to be in control of my life, of what happens to *me*. I don't care what your life is about, you can be in control of that, but I know what's good for me, because I've had to know in order to survive.

"So, here I am in a twenty-five million dollar building in downtown Detroit that I own free and clear and that can only grow in value. I used to beg for money on the street corners but now I have money in hidden accounts that no one can ever touch, not you, not your bosses, no one, not even the IRS. So don't try to tell me I need you or anyone like you, because I don't." She stopped talking. She'd never told anyone these things. She was instantly sorry she'd told him.

He lay staring at her, his eyes dark with some emotion she didn't want to identify. "Tonight, you needed me," he said implacably. "And not for the fuck. You needed more than that from me and I gave it to you. Don't ask me what it was, I don't know, but for a little while tonight you let your guard down and I could see what was behind that hard façade you've erected. You know what, Billie? I can even smell it on you and it smells like fear. You're afraid."

"You bastard," she lunged at him with her nails extended like claws, aiming for his face. He met her attack, his large hands deflecting her blows, capturing her flailing hands, subduing her beneath him on the mattress. He held her lightly, easily as if it took little effort while she thrashed beneath him, bucking against him. He waited for her tantrum to run its course and when, at last, she lay still, trembling beneath him, hiccupping to hold back her rage and tears, he rolled aside and released her hands.

"You can strike me if you want to," he said huskily, "but it won't take back anything I've said."

She couldn't speak for trembling. Her eyes burned but she couldn't blink. She could only stare into his dark eyes and shudder with repressed emotions. Finally, he moved his shoulders and head closer and placed a kiss, tender and innocent, on her forehead. One hand rested against her head, softly smoothing back her hair. He made no other effort to touch her.

She felt childlike, stricken, frightened and powerless but slowly, with each gentle stroke of his big, rough hand, the fright fell away. After a long time, she slept, still hiccupping with unacknowledged sobs. Finally even those subsided.

Sometime during the night she awoke and turned into him, into his warmth and strength. He started, then his arms were there and he bent his head to kiss her on the lips and the kiss grew and became hot and sexual and she felt his cock grow against her leg. Suddenly, she wanted him, more than she ever had. She reared over him, nipping at his mouth, ramming her tongue inside to duel with his. She straddled him, slender thighs on either side of his hips, open to him, to the hard bulge that reared at her moist heat and she pumped her hips frantically. Her hands tore at him, scratching his chest, seizing his hair and ears to hold him still for her assault. She bit him and licked him and bit him again, then began a long trail down his chest toward his belly and the hot, smooth cock waiting there.

"Wait," he grunted, wrapping his arms around her in a bear hug.

"What? Why wait?" she asked, squirming in his embrace.

"We're not going to do it this way again." He held her tight. She bucked against him.

"Yes, we are," she said, "because this is the way I like it. Aren't you man enough for a little rough and tumble?"

He flipped her then and just like that she was on her back staring up at him. He planted two big hands on either side of her head and rose above her.

"I think I've proven I'm man enough," he said quietly. "Now, I'm going to prove that you're woman enough."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" she demanded, trying to roll away from him, but he pinned her with his body much as he'd done earlier in the evening. Panic surged through her.

"Don't do that," she cried. He captured her hands and held them above her head.

"Every time we make love doesn't have to be a fighting match," he said, breathing heavily from his exertions in trying to subdue her. "Sometimes, we can be gentle and take our time." He released her hands and swept the back of his fingers down her cheek in a caress that was especially sensuous. She jerked her head away from his touch, but his lips were there, gentling her, wooing her and she was caught by the exquisite beauty of his touch. She sighed. She'd meant to curse him.

"We are going to make love," he kissed her on her eyelids, "like you're a fine," he slid his tongue along her chin and nuzzled the hollow of her throat, "foxy lady," he whispered softly.

Panic coursed through her. "I'm not a lady," she said, twisting beneath him.

"Yes, you are." He laved her cheek with his tongue. "You're a beautiful, desirable woman who needs to have a man make love to her. That's vastly different than fucking."

"You're a fool," she cried, pushing against his broad chest. The coarse prickly hair scraped against the palms of her hands. "I don't want to be a lady. Ladies are weak and stupid."

"Some ladies are smart and sexy and deserve to be taken care of," he said in the barest of whispers, "and right now, I'm the man who's going to take care of you."

"I don't need you to."

"Yes, Billie, you do." He kissed her deeply, his tongue delving and soothing and lighting fire wherever it touched, his hands stroking and massaging and caressing a flaming path down her belly to her slit. Once there he did all the things he'd done before but with a mesmerizing tenderness that awakened feelings she'd never had before. She was frightened by them, intrigued, captivated.

She opened to him, her thighs relaxing, her knees bent and spread wide for him while a lassitude washed over her and she couldn't move beneath his touch except to open herself farther to him. At first, only his hands massaged her, kneading the firm flesh of her thighs and buttocks then her ribs to her full breasts.

His hands spread wide, cupping her breasts, caressing them in ever-widening circles until every inch of her chest tingled with passion. His fingers delved, massaging her clitoris then the lips on either side and her inner thighs before returning to her clitoris. His probing fingers found her anus and gently rubbed then briefly invaded. She tightened, expecting to find this disgusting, but his touch was quick and sure and gone, leaving behind pulsating muscles.

At some time, she realized, he'd used some of the scented oil she kept at her bedside so his hands slid over her skin creating a different sensation. She sighed. Even Carlos hadn't been this thorough and she'd paid him for it, she thought briefly then concentrated on these new sensations being aroused by Dare Stefanos and his magic hands.

He rose above her, rubbing her with his chest, the springy hair moving across her skin in a sensuous, erotic scrape that awakened every sensory nerve ending she possessed. She gasped and slid her hands over his chest and down to his cock which had grown significantly during his massage demonstration. She kneaded his scrotum, exploring the texture and heat of it before moving to the bulb of his penis. Sometime during all his administrations, he'd donned a condom. She liked that he was protecting them both, but couldn't help wondering how many he had with him. Talk about being prepared. Dare was a real boy scout.

She lowered her head and took him into her mouth, swirling her tongue around the bulbous tip like it was her favorite ice-cream cone. They caressed and licked and aroused in gently escalating moods of sexual desire until he mounted her, pulling her buttocks high and entering her. His movements were measured and sure. His control brought her to a mindless, mind-blowing culmination and all the while he treated her like a lady. Her body had never been so treasured, so revered.

When the climax came, it was long and sustained and utterly satisfying. When at last they lay side by side again, breathing deeply, she turned to him.

"So that's how you make love to a lady?"

"Mmm-hmm," he said, smiling, or make that, smirking. She allowed him.

### Dirty Little Secrets

"Sometimes, it's okay to be gentle and patient," he said self-righteously. "It doesn't make me less of a man or you less of a...whatever you want to be."

She didn't answer. She was already becoming drowsy. But just before she dozed off, she did utter two words.

"Smug bastard."

\* \* \* \* \*

When she woke again, Dare was out of bed, standing in the doorway to the landing wearing nothing but his .38 police special. The light of the moon through the skylight gilded his taut nude body. His head was cocked as though listening.

"What is it?" she demanded, feeling alarm.

"Shhh!" He held up one finger in a warning gesture. Then she heard it. Someone was inside her building working on the door on the landing below.

"Son of a bitch," she whispered hoarsely and sprang out of bed. Without bothering with clothes, she rushed to the walk-in closet and turned on the light. She could hear Dare moving around behind her. When she glanced over her shoulder, he'd pulled on his pants. By that time, she had her hand on the button which flipped open a back panel in the closet. A display of handguns and assault rifles along with stacks of ammunition, even a few grenades were revealed. Without hesitation, she grabbed up a 9mm, cartridges and an automatic, rapid-fire rifle. She headed to the landing where Dare was still waiting, his gun at the ready. He turned his head and looked at her.

"Holy shit," he whispered. "What the hell do you have, an arsenal?"

"Something like that," she said, handing him the rifle and the 9mm. He checked the chambers and nodded with satisfaction when he saw they were fully loaded.

"Do you have any more ammo?" he asked.

"In the bag." She'd already moved back toward the closet to arm herself. While she was at it, she drew on a black spandex unitard and a pair of black mesh boots with thick soles and a pair of thin black gloves. She was back at Dare's side in less than a minute.

"What the hell is that?" he asked, doing a double take over the gun she held in her hand.

"I call it my Dominator," she answered in a low voice.

"Billie, you have some real power issues."

"And right this minute, aren't you glad? I figure we can do two things." She paused, listening to the sounds in the lower half of her building.

"Lady, I can only think of one," he said, tightening his grip on his police special and the other weapon she'd given him. "You have one more option than I have."

"We can stay and fight or -"

"I didn't know we had another choice," he snarled, his focus on the noise on the stairs. They'd breached the door on the second landing.

"Or," she reiterated, "we could get the hell out of here."

He jerked his head around to stare at her. "You have a way out?" His whisper was strained, incredulous.

"Yes, of course," she said gathering her weapons and ammunition and moving away toward the kitchen. Casting a final glance over his shoulder at the pounding that had begun on the final steel door, he followed after her.

"The garbage chute," he said with obvious relief when they reached the kitchen.

"Something like that." She opened a cupboard door, moved the pots and pans to one side, then wriggled inside.

"What do you mean, something like that?" he demanded. "What are you doing, hiding out in the cupboards?"

"Just follow me," she said and pushed against the back wall of the cupboard. It fell away, revealing an open, dark space and a steel ladder. Billie started climbing.

"Where are you going?" he demanded behind her, sticking his head into the open space and looking around. "We should be going down."

"In order to go down, we have to go up," she said. "Be sure you shove the pots back in place and close up the doors."

Dare did as she ordered, marveling at her forethought, then he climbed the short steel ladder behind her. In spite of their danger, he couldn't help admire the round swell of her buttocks and the long slender legs in their skintight suit. At the top, they climbed out onto the roof.

"Clever," he said, closing the vent behind him and looking around. "Now what? Do we wait them out or find a way down off this roof?"

"Follow me," she ordered, "and try not to make any noise in case they've already managed to get inside." Silently they threaded their way around the skylights to the side of the roof where another ladder was embedded in the concrete wall of the next building. It climbed upward for at least two stories.

"You're not afraid of heights, are you?" she asked, slinging her weapon over her shoulder and grasping a rung.

"Not so you can notice," he muttered and followed suit. The air was colder than it had been earlier in the day and a wind had come up, pushing against them as they made their way up. At the top of the ladder they scrambled onto another roof and lay resting from their efforts.

"Come on, we have to keep moving," she said and got to her feet. He had to admit, that incredible body was stronger and more agile than he'd given her credit. He followed her across the roof top, dodging air-conditioning units and vent pipes and an occasional sky light. Finally, they came to the side of a building to yet another ladder.

"Okay, I need to know how much more we're going to climb. I get nosebleeds if I go too high without oxygen."

"Last building," she said. "After this, it's all down and we'll be one block over from -" She glanced back in the direction they'd come.

"I think we're safe enough," he said, grabbing hold of a rung and beginning the climb. "I don't think Charlie's Sweet's men are as acrobatic as you."

"That's what I was counting on," she said following after him.

They didn't talk anymore as they made the climb and crossed another roof, but this time Billie stepped forward and unlocked a service door that led them inside and down several flights of stairs. They circumvented the security guard and at last, were back on the street. They ducked into an alley and studied the dimly lit roadway. At the moment it was empty.

"I think it's safe," she said and turned to him. "It's time we split up."

"The hell it is," he snarled and grabbed her arm. He was prepared for her to fight against him and he wasn't sure he could hang onto her and the stash of weapons.

She didn't fight. She simply looked at him. He loosened the grip on her arm.

"Where are you going now?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I'll lose myself in the crowd," she said, but she didn't look or sound all that confident. She knelt and began to dig through her bag with increasing agitation.

"Shit!" She rummaged frantically.

"What is it?"

"Carlos! That lousy prick. He took my money." She looked up at him, her empty hands resting on her knees. "I'll kill that bastard if I ever get my hands on him."

"Looks like you need me, Princess." He glanced at the sky as if gauging something, then finally bent his arm and squinted to see his watch. "It's two a.m. Let's go to my apartment. We'll be safe there for the night, then you can talk to the D.A. in the morning and tell him what you know about Pepe Cosimero's death. If it's self-defense, you'll be okay. What we're really after is Charlie Sweet."

She made a sound, halfway between a scoff and a snarl.

"Why would you think I know anything about Charlie Sweet?"

"I don't know, call it cop instinct," he said and yanked on her arm. "Come on, I'm beat. We'll go to my place and regroup."

She brushed his clasp away and planted her feet stubbornly, her small chin jutting, her emerald eyes flashing. Her tousled hair was a spun-gold halo around her head.

"Look, I don't owe you anything. In fact it's the other way round, I just saved your ass."

"You saved my ass?" He looked at her thunderstruck.

"Look, if not for me and my foresight, you would still be back there on the landing waiting for them to break through that last door." She paused and looked puzzled. "By the way, how the hell did they get through those steel doors?"

"Acetylene torch."

"Damn. All that money I spent to put them in and all for nothing."

He shrugged philosophically. "Just when you think you've got a good idea, someone comes along with a better one. Come on, my car's parked just around the corner. We'll be at my apartment in twenty minutes." He wasn't sure what made her follow, fatigue or curiosity, or because he'd made her promises he hadn't meant to make. His gut instinct told him she was a scammer, a con artist, a grifter, and no matter how appealing, he'd heard you could never trust them. Never.

## \* \* \* \* \*

She was gone.

He knew it even before he opened his eyes. He felt the emptiness of the bed, the coolness at his side where a warm bundle had curled for a few short hours. He told himself it didn't matter, but he had an overwhelming sense of loss.

He forced his eyes open, reflecting on the night he'd spent with Billie. He didn't even know her last name. How the hell had he missed that? Let's face it, he thought, getting out of bed and fast-walking bare-assed through his apartment, that scrappy little piece of humanity had gotten to him. His first order of business was to make absolutely sure she was gone.

Not only was Billie not there, but neither was her bag of assault weapons and ammunition. Where the hell could she have gone and why? He tamped down the frisson of fear threatening to take hold and reminded himself she'd been the best piece of ass he'd had in—well, forever and he'd let her get to his head. Both of them, he acknowledged philosophically. He walked to the bathroom and stepped into the shower.

A deluge of cold water nearly drowned all erotic thoughts of his late-night guest, but not quite. He turned the hot water up high and stood under the pulsating stream and thought of Billie with her lithe body, big tits and soft pussy. It wasn't what she had that was so right, but what she did with it. He soaped up and scrubbed down, feeling so satiated there was no need to beat the bishop this morning.

Besides he had to look for Billie. God alone knew where she'd gone off to or what kind of maniac was chasing her today.

As he slid into a fresh pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, he reminded himself it wasn't really that he cared about her, although she was a looker and stubborn as a hybrid mule, but because she could be his key to Charlie Sweet and if he could bring in Charlie with real evidence that he'd offed his boss, then he could be back in Homicide in a blink of an eye. All would be forgiven.

Of course, the best thing that could happen would be if he found his old partner Boyd along the way to getting Sweet, and Boyd cleared him. He'd be back in his old department without a mark on his name. That would take a miracle though, and he didn't believe in those anymore. He'd just settle for getting Sweet, getting the girl, who in this case would be Billie, and getting his old job back. Not too much for a guy to expect.

Just as he was shoving his wallet into his back pocket and grabbing a leather jacket, the phone rang. He checked the ID just in case it was work calling and saw that Phil Merkel was on the other line.

"Hey, Dare, where you been?" Merk asked when he answered. "I was trying to reach you last night."

"I...ah...got caught downtown," he said without elaborating. Let Merkel believe he was at the station.

"Nobody could find you," Phil insisted.

"That's how it goes sometimes," Dare said. "What did you want?"

"I needed to talk to you about a suspect."

"What suspect?"

"You tell me." There was a long, heavy silence while Merk waited for his reaction.

"I'm afraid you've got me there, pal. I don't have a suspect for you."

"Oh, I thought maybe you went down to talk to Billie Stone."

"Stone?" Dare snapped his fingers. "So that's her last name."

"Yeah, she owns the Cramer building down by Cobo Arena. Somebody broke in there last night. Thought you might know about it."

"I'm afraid I don't." Dare waited a heartbeat. "Have you got another stiff?"

"No, she got away."

"Sorry to hear that. Listen, Merk, I gotta go."

"Yeah, sure. I just thought I'd brief you on things so you can keep an ear to the ground. If you see Billie Stone, you'll let us know where she is, won't you?"

"I don't think that's going to happen," Dare answered honestly. "I don't have a clue where the lady is."

"Well," Phil drawled, "just in case you run into her. We're looking for her for murder one."

"Jesus, Merk, not for Pepe. You could see for yourself, she was tied up and held against her will. If they hadn't raped her yet, it was just a matter of time. That doesn't sound like murder one to me. It sounds more like self-defense."

"I wasn't talking about Pepe Cosimero," Phil grunted. "The lady left a small flashlight lying by Udall's computer in his mansion out on Grosse Pointe the night he was killed. We were able to get a print off it and because the little lady got picked up back when she was still in her teens, we had prints on file. Oh, and a car matching the description of hers was seen fleeing from the area a couple of blocks away. We think she was robbing the place when he came home early from the benefit concert and found her. She killed him and the senator's daughter then made her getaway. Well, I'll see you around, pal."

"Wait, Merk, is that all the evidence you have against her? Just a flashlight?"

"That's all we need.

"Her prints on the flashlight only prove she was there, not that she killed him. The same is true for the car. Besides, if you didn't get the license plate, you can't be sure it was hers."

"Oh, we've got a little more than that. If the robbery gone bad doesn't stick, then we've got to look at the jealousy motive. After all, she did catch him with his dick in the mouth of the senator's daughter. See you around, Dare."

Merk hung up and Dare stood, eyes narrowed, holding the phone, recounting in his mind all that the detective had revealed. Had Billie really killed Udall and the girl? He felt dead certain that she could have if she'd felt she needed to, but did she?

He pocketed his keys and left his apartment. He had to go downtown to the precinct or Hogan would have his balls in a sling. He put in an appearance, then mumbled something about seeing a man about a dog and left. He could hear the Irishman letting out a string of particularly inventive cuss words, but he kept going.

Something was going on. He could feel it in his bones, that same feeling he used to get when he was in Homicide. Something was in the air and he wasn't letting go of his end until he earned his place back in his old division, then Pete Hogan and his Bunco squad could go to hell.

He jumped in his Mustang and made his way out to Grosse Pointe. The murder scene was three days old now and the detectives and their team would have been all over the scene, but he wanted to see for himself. He knew damn well Merkel wouldn't share any of the details with him. This murder was the big one that could make or break a detective. The fact that Billie left behind a flashlight didn't necessarily mean she did the killing, but it sure as hell placed her at the scene.

At the Udall estate, a squad car was parked in front of the gate and a young officer watched Dare as he got out of his car and walked over.

"Hi there," Dare said flashing his badge. "You all alone down here?"

The young cop nodded solemnly. "My partner will be here in an hour."

Dare nodded, congratulating himself on his timing.

"I'm just going inside to take a look around," he said.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm not supposed to let anyone in," the officer said with a look of regret that showed his inexperience.

"You haven't gotten a call from Phil Merkel from Homicide?" Dare asked, shoving his badge back into his belt and fixing him with a stern glare.

"No, sir, I haven't."

"Well, damn. He said he was going to call you right away. Look, what is your name?"

"Officer Bill Howard, sir."

"Well, Officer Howard, Bill, is your phone on?"

"Yes, sir, it is." The young cop checked just in case.

"He must have gotten tied up. He wanted me to go over the crime scene one more time, see what I could come up with. We're due at a meeting at two. Damn!" He paced back and forth across the driveway. "This is so typical. You get called in on something so you hurry down and then you have to stand around and wait. It's not like I don't have cases of my own to take care of. I was just doing this as a favor for Merk."

Officer Howard looked sympathetic but made no comment.

"Hey, look," Dare said as if he'd just thought of it. "The reason you're out here is to keep people from entering who might destroy evidence, right?" Howard nodded and Dare hurried on. "What if you escort me inside to look things over? You can make sure I don't touch anything I shouldn't and I can get my job done."

The officer hesitated then shrugged. "I don't see any harm in that, especially as long as you already have permission." He got out of his patrol car and walked to the gate, pushing it open.

"Hey, thanks, pal. I'm sure Merkel will get his ass in gear soon and call you."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

They headed up the drive toward the two-storied, stone mansion. Towering pines and majestic oaks hugged the driveway and opened out into a huge rolling lawn that could easily have converted to a small golf course. Severely trimmed box shrubs and carefully tended flower beds added to the tight-assed, too-good-to-be-true aura of the place.

Howard led Dare right to the front door, inserted a key and let him in. Dare looked around, thinking his apartment could fit into the foyer without blocking the carpeted, curving wood staircase leading to the second floor. Rooms opened off each side of the foyer and from their furnishings he guessed them to be the formal living room, dining room and library. Huge, crystal chandeliers hung from a molded ceiling and wide arches led from room to room. Dare figured his whole year's salary couldn't buy one of the long white sofas. This was a world far removed from his own.

"The murders took place upstairs," Howard said indicating the stairs, and Dare headed that way only to be caught up short before an antique cabinet. He whistled in admiration. He had no idea what era it came from, but even a dolt like him could see it was worth a good penny.

"The butler said it was an 1820 Regency penwork cabinet," Howard said, coming back to join him in front of the cabinet. "It's valued at a half-million dollars." His tone held a hushed reverence.

Dare whistled again and shook his head. "I don't like it. There's not enough room for my socks and shorts."

Howard chuckled and led the way upstairs. The second floor of the Udall mansion was as impressive as the first, but Dare tuned out the fancy furnishings and concentrated on the layout of the bedrooms.

"This was Mr. Udall's master suite," Howard said, opening a set of double doors. They entered a room big enough to house a basketball court. Easy chairs and tables sat in a semicircle at one end facing a stone fireplace, but Dare turned his attention to the bloody spills still evident at the other end near the bed.

"Two of them were killed at the same time. The bullets passed through her body into his and they both died instantly," Howard said quietly, but his cheeks reddened as he continued. "She wasn't any older than my kid sister, but she still had his dick in her mouth."

"Yeah, I heard that," Dare said remembering how that little detail had quickly spread through the department. It had been hushed up in the papers, but every cop in town knew about Udall and the Senator's daughter.

He turned his attention to the rest of the room. What if Billie had been here that night? What if she'd witnessed the murder? Then why hadn't the killer gotten rid of her as well? Because she was hidden. He considered that scenario and studied the room. Where would she have been hidden so no one knew she was there? He crossed to the closet and looked inside.

"I'm not sure you're supposed to do that," Howard stuttered a halfhearted protest.

"I won't tell if you don't, son. I'm just looking," Dare said. Nothing was out of place, no sign of someone having pushed themselves into this closet. Each suit-bearing hanger hung precisely spaced from its neighbor. Carefully, he closed the doors and turned to the archway that led to a study. A rich mahogany desk sat in the middle of the room with a space for a computer which was no longer there. Ten to one, Merkel and his team had it downtown with an expert working it over.

Bookshelves lined the rest of the room except for a slatted door in one corner. Dare crossed to it, opened it and stepped inside before closing the door again. Squatting down, he peered through the slats right at the bloody spot where Udall and his nymphet had fallen.

"Sir," Howard said, pulling open the door and peering in questioningly. His young face was creased with concern and indecision.

"I was just checking out a theory," Dare said. "I think I've seen everything I need to. Thank you for your patience."

"No problem, Sir," Howard said with obvious relief and followed him back downstairs. "Did you find out anything more that might help find the killer?"

"Nah, I think Merk and his guys have got it figured out right." They walked out of the mansion and back down to the gate.

"Thanks again," Dare said giving him a small salute. "You let me know if Merk fails to call you about this."

#### Dirty Little Secrets

"I will," the young cop said and got back into his squad car. Dare put his Mustang in gear and headed back downtown. He had some ideas about what had happened the night Sam Udall was killed and why Charlie Sweet was after Billie. She'd been a witness to Udall's murder and she had to be silenced. She was in bigger trouble than he had guessed. Now the problem was how to find her and how to keep her ass alive until he could connect Charlie Sweet to the murder of Udall and to the state Senator's daughter.

He ran a hand over his face and chuckled. "Man, you've jumped into the middle of it now", he muttered, but felt no remorse. Hell, whether they transferred him back to Homicide or not, Dare Stefanos was back on track!

\* \* \* \* \*

The best way to handle a problem was to confront it. That had been Billie's credo most of her life and she couldn't see why she should change now. She had three objectives, but they each carried risks. First and foremost, she had to retrieve her laptop. With that she had access to her off-shore bank accounts. With unlimited funds, she could buy her safety no matter where in the city or the world she went. Staying out of sight until she got her hands on some money was essential. She had a couple more stashes in the apartment, if Carlos or Sweet's men hadn't found them.

Lastly, she needed to stash her weapons where she could get to them fast if needed. She couldn't continue to wander around downtown Detroit carrying an arsenal. It was cumbersome and heavy and just plain stupid. The best place to stash her guns might be where they'd least expect, they being Charlie and his men as well as Dare Stefanos and his cop pals, in her old stronghold. Once they'd breached it, they wouldn't expect her to come back.

She walked with purpose as if she knew where she was going and had no cares in the world, but when she reached the alleyway behind her building, she cast a quick glance around and scooted out of sight. Folding down behind the dumpster, she opened her bag and took out her Dominator, smiling slightly as she remembered Dare's reaction. She checked the clip and thumbed off the safety while she waited long minutes to see if anyone had followed her. When no sound or movement revealed an enemy, she scooted over to the brick where she kept her spare key hidden. The brick had been pulled out, the space was empty.

Son of a bitch, she thought. How had anyone known about that? One name came to mind. *Carlos, you bastard, I'm going to fry your ass.* 

Taking another quick look to see if anyone else was around, she tightened her grip on the gun and her bag then made a run for the back door. Sure enough it was left wide open, the key dangling in the lock. She left it, moving swiftly to the shadows below the stairs where she waited, listening, gauging the gloomy corners and patches of sunlight, smelling the air for foreign bodies. Part of her ached for the security this familiar location promised and despair for the real danger it now represented.

Barely breathing, she waited then waited some more. Finally, she moved to the bottom of the stairs and made her way up them, her gun at the ready. At the second landing she took shelter behind the damaged metal door, noting the hole that had been cut into it.

Once again she waited then took a deep, slow breath and swung around the door onto the landing. The offices on this floor had been kept empty and used as storage. Pressed against a wall, she studied the closed doors. Behind any one of them one of Charlie's gunmen could be lurking, waiting for her to come back.

She two-fisted her pistol in front of her and tiptoed down the corridor, flipping open doors and peering into empty rooms. When she reached the final door, she realized she was holding her breath and let it out in a slow, ragged whoosh. No one was here! Still, as she made her way back to the stairs, she kept her weapon handy.

The third floor door had a hole the size of a fist just above the steel bar. The bar had been flung to one side and the door left open. Stepping carefully, she entered her living quarters and looked around. The skylight windows were closed so the rooms lay in gloom. She made her way through her apartment without turning on lights, but she could see the devastation her frustrated pursuers had wrought. They'd left very little untouched.

Hurrying now, she crossed to her dresser. Drawers had been pulled out, their contents dumped, their bottoms exposed. She cursed under her breath. They'd found one of her stashes of money and fake identification. She was growing more anxious now. Fear crawled up her spine as she hurried to the dresser and felt behind the mirror then strained to reach farther. Finally, she slumped in defeat. They'd been thorough. They found her last emergency fund. Or could she blame that on Carlos as well? She almost applauded him. She'd dismissed him as a mindless pretty boy, but he'd been watching out for himself all the time.

Her laptop! She raised her head and looked around. That was gone too. She couldn't imagine why Sweet and his pals would want that. Most of them appeared illiterate. Besides, it wouldn't do them any good to pry. Her computer was protected with a special safety feature of her own devising. When they missed the password a third time, her hard drive would self-destruct.

She looked around the room again. There was nothing else she needed from here. She had to move on before they caught up with her. And they would, she had no doubt of that. As if on cue, she heard a sound on the stairs and grabbed for her gun, holding it at the ready while she crept back to the landing and peered down the stairs. A shot rang out and pinged against the steel door. Damn, they'd found her already.

Ducking back she swung the damaged door closed and dropped the bar back in place. With that hole in the door, it wouldn't protect her for long, but she could hold them off for a while. She took a position just inside the bedroom where she could see the landing and waited. She could hear them moving up, a scrape of shoe leather on concrete stairs, a soft curse, deep breathing as if they'd run up the stairs. They were out

of shape, she thought with a moment of spite and remembered Dare's observation the night before. Funny that she should miss him at a moment like this.

A gloved hand snuck through the ragged hole and fastened on the steel bar, straining to ease it out of place. She let off a shot and felt some satisfaction when the owner of the hand screamed, withdrew his hand and let out a stream of curse words as he pelted down the stairs. She took advantage of her momentary triumph and sprang forward to peer through the door. There were three of them in all, one of them wounded and making his retreat, the other two staring after him in bug-eyed surprise. She put her gun up to the opening and fired several shots in a wild pattern that was bound to hit someone.

Sure enough, a scream of anguish came from the other side of the door. She retreated to the bedroom and reloaded. What she feared happened next. More footsteps could be heard running up the stairs. Reinforcements.

She couldn't hold them off indefinitely. She had to get out of here. She got down on her belly and crawled across the landing toward the kitchen. A shot splintered the wall and sent glass from a framed picture cascading over her. Another one hit lower. She half dove, half rolled into the dining room then looked back at the landing door. They were already working at the steel bar again. Once they got in the odds would be against her ever getting out alive. She shot several times and headed for the hidden escape.

The contents of the kitchen cupboards had been thrown all over the floor and some of the cupboards themselves had been torn loose from the walls. It looked like a petulant, destructive child had thrown his giant Legos all around. They'd probably already found her hidden escape route, but it was all she had left.

Once she was out of their line of fire, she got to her feet and ran, rounding the kitchen island. An arm shot out and wrapped around her neck, jerking her to a halt. She kicked out, connecting with a shin.

"Son of a bitch," her assailant yelled, hopping on one foot. She hesitated, thinking she'd never been so happy to hear a cop's voice before.

"Dare, what are you doing here?" she cried. A loud clatter came from the landing. "Shit, there's no time to talk now. We've got to get out of here."

She was already wriggling through the back of the cabinet to the ladder and pulling her ammo bag behind her.

"Leave it," Dare shouted.

"No, we may need it."

"Go, go!" he shouted, pushing her and her bag. He'd climbed halfway up her body, so his hands were only a rung below hers.

"Hurry, damn it," he yelled. "I've got on a vest, but I don't have a god damn thing protecting my ass." He practically pushed her out onto the roof and dove out of the ladder chute. Shots rang out, spitting asphalt and tar paper in their faces.

"Get the lid on," Dare shouted and rolled to his feet, his hands already tugging the steel disc that closed off the ladder area. Billie was right beside him, helping to push it in place. Shots pinged through the opening until the lid was on tight, then someone shouted below and Dare laughed.

"Some smart-ass didn't think about ricochets," he said.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, kneeling on the lid.

"Saving your ass, again."

"How did you get here?" She looked at him curiously.

"I was looking for you and when I saw those thugs were out there, I figured if you'd been dumb enough to come back here, you could use some help, so I reversed the route we took last night. Of course, I had a few diversions or I would have been here sooner." He waved at two bodies that lay nearby. More of Charlie's men.

"Are they dead?"

"Nah, just enjoying a little nap."

The lid she was sitting on rose slightly on one side before clamping back into place.

"We've got to weigh it down," she said. "Even I could push it open from below."

"There're no locks on it?"

"Not from up here."

Dare looked around wildly. There was nothing in sight except some rope and that sure as hell wouldn't weigh down the lid so the bad guys couldn't get up. He looked at the lid with the ring through it and two antennas nearby. Grabbing up the rope, he wrapped it through the ring then tied it off to the antennas on either side.

"Will this hold?" Billie asked doubtfully.

"Princess, it's not the best solution, but it'll delay our friends long enough for us to get away." He looked at her. "Are you ready?"

She nodded and in one swift movement that surprised him, she was on her feet and running in long, efficient strides to the other side of the roof. She scaled up the ladder like a monkey, her feet barely touching the rungs before she was up and on to the next roof. Dare was pretty damn agile himself, following her up faster than he'd ever thought he could climb a ladder at a ninety-degree angle. A feeling of déjà vu swept over him.

"Didn't we just do this?" he shouted and didn't get an answer. He hadn't expected one.

At the top of the next roof they turned and looked back. The gunmen had the lid nearly off, cursing and shouting advice to the ones who struggled to disentangle the rope. Billie and Dare got to their feet and took the next ladder with the same speed. When they reached the top, they couldn't see their followers, but they could hear them on the first ladder.

### Dirty Little Secrets

"Let's go," Billie said and led the way through the same door and down the same flights of stairs they'd taken the night before. This time there was no guard at the desk. He stood out on the sidewalk with another man staring up at the rooftops.

Billie grabbed Dare when he would have stepped out. "Stay back. I recognize that man," she said and they faded back into the stairwell. They could hear their pursuers at the roof door six stories above them.

Dare looked for an escape. "Do you know this building very well?"

"Not really." She peered back into the reception hall. A high enclosed L-shaped security desk sat to one side sporting a bank of screens.

"Look at that desk," she said. "We could hide behind there."

"That's not very safe."

"It's better than standing here waiting for those guys to climb down and shoot us to death," she whispered sarcastically.

"Good point."

With her eyes peeled toward the glass doors and the security guard and gunman outside, she crawled on her elbows and belly across the polished marble floor to the security desk. Dare scrambled after her. They'd no sooner crawled under the counter when the stairwell door burst open and four men charged out, their guns drawn, their faces twisted into major pissed-off expressions.

Billie edged up to the corner and chanced a quick glance around the edge of the desk. Sweet's men charged out the door and stood on the sidewalk looking around and gesturing wildly to their lookout. When it was clear that Billie hadn't come out that way, they headed back inside. Dare grabbed her and pulled her back out of sight. They could hear the echo of footprints and angry voices as the men spread out through the corridors and back up the stairs, searching for their quarry.

"We could get out now," Billie whispered.

"Where's the guard?"

"I'm right here, son," a voice said and they looked up to see the security guard with his pistol pointed straight at them.

# **Chapter Four**

"Shit!" Dare swung his gun around but he knew it was too late. The old geezer had the drop on them.

"Hi, Billie," the guard said. "How you doin' today?"

"I'm fine, Max," she answered softly. "I'm in a bit of a bind just now."

"So I've observed," Max said affably. He glanced over his shoulder. "It looks pretty clear right now if you two hurry."

"Thanks, Max. I owe you one."

"I wouldn't worry about that just now. Those guys look like they mean business." The old man holstered his gun and gazed at them with rheumy blue eyes.

"What?" Dare hissed. "He's letting us go?" He was already on his feet and at the old man's nod, he took off dragging Billie behind him. They ran through the door and hugged the buildings as they jogged south toward Cobo Hall. Feeling exposed, Dare kept glancing over his shoulder and around corners when they came to a stoplight. He expected to see a carload of gunmen slide up beside them and start shooting at any moment.

Two short blocks and they were at the arena. Traffic, both foot and vehicle, was heavy. Policemen were everywhere, directing traffic. Billie yanked Dare's arm and angled away.

"Car show," he said. "Come on, we'll be harder to find in a crowd."

"No cops," she specified, glaring at him.

"No cops," he agreed.

With quick glances over their shoulders, they joined the surge of car-happy people eagerly heading into the arena. Inside, the cavernous hall was all razzle-dazzle with sweeping spotlights and multiple stages and giant turntables showcasing the best and the latest that Detroit and the rest of the motor world had to offer. Glib salesmen, designers and sexy models extolled the virtues of the latest technological and engineering wonders on four wheels.

People wandered from one display to the next, listening to the spiels. Dare and Billie angled toward the back of the hall, all the while checking to see if Sweet's men had followed them.

"There they are," she said, ducking low behind a racy-looking silver Nissan Micra that would make any pimply faced teenage boy have wet dreams. Dare glanced at a discreet sticker that gave its essentials and nearly whistled when he read its miles per gallon were only 13.4, obviously not a car to consider on his policeman's salary. Billie's hand tangled in his waistband and jerked him down, reminding him now was not the

time to get lost in every American man's fantasy. Cautiously, he stretched to take a peek and glimpsed the two hoods who looked as out of place as a couple of water buffalo amongst a flock of flamingoes. People automatically gave them a wide berth.

"Can I help you?" asked a young man in a silk Italian suit and glossy hair asked, bending down to determine what had captured their attention.

Dare looked up at him then at Billie.

"I was just pointing out these wheel spokes," Billie said. "They are so cool."

"Ah, yes, but don't mistake this car as just all flashy looks. This baby has a Nismo tuned 3.5 litre V6 engine which can take anything on the road. It's one of our fast fleet cars." Even the salesman's smile was glossy as he moved closer to Billie. One manicured hand touched her elbow, helping her rise. He brushed back his designer hair then tipped his head so it automatically fell across his brow again while his eyes telegraphed a message of sex such as no woman could ever comprehend. Dare wanted to ram the pretty boy's glossy leer right down his throat.

And Billie? The ungrateful woman seemed to be eating it up. She was outdoing Mr. Gloss with a toothy smile of her own. Dare thought about walking away and leaving the two of them to out-beam each other with their dental work, but then he caught a glimpse of Sweet's burly gunmen and quickly turned, taking Billie's elbow in a sharp grip.

"Ouch," she said and shook herself, trying to get away from him.

"Oh, look, darling. There's one of those hybrid cars. You know how we're trying to save money on gas so we can afford another Botox treatment for you." He led her away from Mr. Gloss and toward a Mini Cooper, hiding behind the bright yellow body.

"What are you doing?" she snapped, eyes flashing. "You can't just drag me around like this."

"Oh yeah? Well, while you and Mr. Fancy Pants over there were showing off your dental work, Charlie Sweet's men were bearing down on us." She turned to look but he jerked her around again. "Don't look." Together they quick-walked past two other exhibits and took cover behind a Ferrari 612 Scaglietti. Dare's heart was in his throat and it had nothing to do with fear of Sweet's boys. He wasn't a Motor city native for nothing. His hand automatically smoothed over the round curve of the Ferrari's fender with the same appreciation he'd shown to the curve of Billie's hip.

"Hello, handsome," a sultry voice said. Dare glanced over his shoulder then did a double take. A model was draped across the midnight blue hood like a life-size ornament. Her long, sensuous body, barely sheathed in a skimpy red lame gown, went on endlessly. Dare figured her legs were at least two miles long and her feet, nails painted in the same red ribbon color as her stiletto heels were arched and sexy as hell if you had a foot fetish and Dare just decided he did. Her long, dark hair was like a silk curtain, spilling across her shoulders and wafting across her breasts. Dare knew he was a breast man, but this girl offered him a glimpse of a paradise he'd never contemplated before.

She lounged against the expensive polished hood as if God had made her that way and poured her over the car like smooth whiskey with a beer chaser.

"Let's go," Billie said sharply, tugging on his arm.

"Just a minute."

"Now, Dare," Billie insisted and it hardly registered that her words were less a command than an out-and-out plea. He couldn't get his mind beyond the red lips, same color as her toenails, and the sultry dark eyes smiling at him.

He took a breath and considered asking the model for her phone number, but the thought passed almost at once. She was eye candy and suddenly he'd lost his taste for it. At that precise moment, a rose bloomed above one plump breast and he stood entranced wondering how she'd done that.

"Come on, Dare," Billie cried. "You're going to get your balls shot off." Some frantic note in her voice made him turn to look at her. She was staring back the way they'd come. He followed her gaze in time to see the burly gunman lower his weapon while all around him people screamed and fled in blind panic.

His puzzled gaze moved back to the exotic beauty with the rose. The petals had separated and begun to run in long streams down toward the dark hollow between her breasts. The smile was gone from her face, her sultry gaze had dimmed and her expression was dull and unfocused. Slowly, she leaned forward and laid her cheek on the shiny waxed hood as if she'd decided to take a nap. She was dead.

"Dare, what's the matter with you?" Billie cried and yanked at his arm. A shot skimmed the top of the Ferrari leaving a long crease in the immaculate paint job.

"Jesus Christ!" Billie yanked him down behind the car and slapped him, hard, on both cheeks. "Wake up, you silly ass, or we'll both be dead."

He blinked and everything came back into focus. Grabbing Billie's hand, he spun out of his crouch and ran, bent at the waist. A rain of bullets followed their progress as they dodged behind the next display. The hall was filled with pandemonium as women screamed and men shouted. Artificial greenery, trimmed by the flow of bullets, floated through the air, bullets zinged against lovingly polished metal.

Someone on a bullhorn ordered everyone down to the floor. Since it didn't sound like the guys chasing them, Dare decided it was good advice and slid down pulling Billie with him. He belly-crawled around the next display and turned to peer back at the front of the hall. The cavalry had arrived. Uniformed policemen were pouring into the building while security guards with drawn guns converged on the knot of people still standing in the middle of the arena. More shots rang out and Dare was satisfied to see the hunter had become the hunted. Sweet's hired hands were running for their lives. The police and security guards were giving full chase.

"Here," Dare said getting to his knees and opening a door to a minivan. He motioned Billie to follow and crawled inside. When she was in, he pushed the button and the door closed soundlessly. They were in the middle of three rows of deep cushioned, leather seats.

"What are we doing in here?" she asked, obviously not happy to be trapped in a small space. "This makes us too vulnerable. Let's get out of here while we can."

"Think about it," he whispered. "The guards chased the bad guys out of the hall, but they're going to be out there waiting on the street for us. The people in charge are not going to keep the show going after all the shooting. I saw some bodies go down. The police are going to be in here. We'll just wait for them."

"Oh, no, I'm not," Billie said pushing up from the deep bucket seat.

"Hey, stay down for now. These windows are all tinted except the front, no one can see us."

"I'm not staying here until the police come arrest me." She stared at him with wide eyes. Beyond the tinted van windows, the hall was rapidly emptying.

"Why would they arrest you?" he asked, pulling her back against his shoulder.

"Because," she said petulantly and crossed her arms. "I know you think I killed Pepe. All right, maybe I did, but it was self-defense."

"I believe you."

"Then why should I surrender to the police?" She leaned forward to gaze into his eyes, her own like dark multifaceted emeralds.

"Would you surrender to me?" he asked softly. "I'll show you *my* Dominator." She opened her mouth to argue then caught his meaning and looked around the cramped quarters.

"Have you ever done it in a car?" she asked. Dare smiled. He knew he had a good smile that made him look sexy. One of his girlfriends had told him so and he'd chosen to believe her. He used that smile now, pouring on the charm and watched the smile spread across his face.

"My first time was in a car," he said, "with Sophia Nanos. We were parked outside her parents' house and her grandmother was hollering, 'Sophia, it's time to come in."" He glanced at her. "Where was your first time?"

"In the bandroom."

He laughed. "Don't tell me you did it with a tuba player."

"The band teacher."

Startled, he looked at her. "Christ, don't you have any good memories?"

"That was a good memory." She sat up and looked around. "Everyone's gone now except the cops and they're busy with people who got shot. This would be a good time to leave."

"Wait, Billie."

She turned to look at him, her brow creased in puzzlement.

"Look, that girl back there, she was just – "

"What? Don't tell me nothing, because the only head you were thinking with left a huge bulge in your pants. Besides, you can look all you want. You can even touch for all

I care. Just because we fucked, doesn't mean we owe each other anything, so go ahead and make a fool out of yourself."

That pissed Dare off, plain and simply. He'd never before apologized to a woman for looking at another woman, and now that he had, she was reminding him he had no claim on her.

"Well, that makes me real happy to know," he said putting a lot of sarcasm into his words. "But don't feel too high and mighty here, the way you were carrying on with that slick salesman back there was a glory to behold. I was worried you were going to knock each other's eyes out with all those shiny smiles."

"It was only a smile," she answered shortly. "Whereas, you with that...that Miss Sultry 'Sex-Pot of the Year' were so caught up in your fantasies, you couldn't tell you were about to get shot."

"That's not true. She was eye candy, nothing more." Suddenly, they fell silent. Dare remembered the beautiful girl who no doubt still adorned the hood of the Ferrari but not quite in the way the sponsors had in mind.

"Thanks for warning me," he said softly. "I was preoccupied."

"I noticed."

"I was working my way through something."

"No doubt with the logistics of how to get her inside a car like you did Sophia whoever."

"You know, you cut a man off before he even has a chance to..." He searched for the word, for the thought that had briefly flashed its warning in his brain.

"What?" she asked, raising her hands in a gesture of impatience.

"Never mind," he grumbled and leaned forward to leave the van. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement and even as her hand reached for the button to open the door, he snatched it away, bear hugging her backward into the leather bench seat that formed the third row. She was on top of him, pinning both their Dominators between them, her cheek pressed against his.

"What the hell are you doing?" she demanded, struggling against him.

"Shh, someone's out there," he whispered and she went limp against him. They waited, barely breathing. Dare tried to think what he could do if whoever was out there opened the door. Billie seemed to be on the same wave length, because she moved slightly and brought up her weapon. His was still trapped between them.

"Don't shoot," he whispered in her ear. "It might just be a guard."

"It might not," she whispered back.

"Don't shoot an innocent man."

"I'll shoot you instead," she said with considerable irritation. "You're the one who got me into this."

"I got you into this?"

"You're the one who said to go with the crowd, that they'd never find us in here."

Dare had never seen anyone shout in a whisper before, but the phenomenon only halted him for a second.

"I went back to rescue you, you ungrateful—"

"I know." Her tone had gone softer. The fingers of her free hand brushed across his lips. "I've never had anyone come to rescue me, before."

"You haven't?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Ever?"

"Never." She smiled. "Thank you." She surprised him by lowering her head and kissing him on the lips. At first, the kiss was chaste, but as all things between them, it quickly heated up. Her tongue swept across his lips and delved inside. She laughed when his "Dominator" jerked.

"We can't do anything about that now," she teased.

"Is anyone around us?"

They both peered over the seat back.

"Looks clear," Billie observed. "We should go." She shifted as if about to rise. He clamped his arms around her, grinding his erection against her belly.

"Only one problem with that," he whispered, kissing her again.

"What?"

"I can't walk right now."

"Ooh, I see. I suppose like always you want me to find a way to deal with it."

"That would be nice."

"Ummm." She nibbled his lower lip. "It might be at that."

She slid down his body and unfastened his jeans. He raised his hips as she tugged down the denim, he fumbled with a condom and then her mouth was on him, soft and moist and demanding. He arched upward. Her teeth raked against the sensitive underside of his bulb, then she sheathed him within her mouth and moved her head vigorously. Dare felt like the top of his head was coming off, both of them, at the unrelenting onslaught on his cock. Just about when he thought he might come in her talented mouth, she let up for a moment, drew a deep breath and began again, this time with her tongue on top of his penis so he felt the rake of her lower teeth and the soft flesh of her palate.

What man doesn't like a blowjob, Dare figured. He could just lie here and enjoy, but he couldn't let her do all the work and not have the payoff, so with amazing selfrestraint, he tampered down his roaring climax and pushed her away, only long enough to flip her over and pin her against the soft leather seat.

Okay, so if he couldn't have the granddaddy of all blowjobs every man fantasizes about, then running neck and neck was the one about burying his hard, throbbing cock

deep into the hot, moist pussy of the woman of his choice and that would be Billie, hands down. His goal was to bring her to the most outrageous, heart-stopping climax she'd ever experienced as soon as he got her out of this spandex, head-to-toe unitard.

"Does this thing have an opening someplace I don't know about?" he asked, growing frustrated with his efforts.

"From the neck down," she said with exasperation. "That's why I was willing to just give you a head job."

"Well, I want more," he said, finding the zipper at the back of her leotard and making expert use of it. He yanked the garment off her shoulders and arms and pushed it down to her waist. Her beautiful, abundant breasts were fully exposed and he leaned forward to suckle, enjoying the now-familiar taste of her. He tongued one nipple and then the other, pretty content to just stay at this stage for a while, now that he had his raging libido under control again.

"Hey, let's get to the main course," Billie whispered, biting him on the neck and simultaneously raising her hips to push the garment down the rest of the way. Dare helped her then sat back on his heels to gaze at her pale body against the red leather.

"Now this is the way to sell a car," he said appreciatively.

She laughed then stopped as if startled at her reaction. Then something dawned in her eyes and she laughed again and reached for his shirt pulling him down to her. Her hand searched for and found his cock and guided it to herself.

"Dare?" she asked softly.

"Mmmm?"

"This time, forget I'm a lady," she instructed and wrapped her slender legs around his middle. He embedded himself in her with a hard thrust that made her coo with delight. He was of one mind with her. Now was not the time for tender, romantic culmination while angels sang their approval from overhead. From somewhere in the arena, speakers still blared music, this time a saucy Latin number with a devastating beat and their bodies fell into the rhythm of it with great alacrity. He could feel his climax building. He was a volcano, Etna, Vesuvius, St. Helens, about to spew forth. Billie screamed, her nails clawing his buttocks while he rammed with jackhammer precision against her and erupted.

"All right. Come out of there," someone shouted, pounding on the windows. "Open up and climb out of there."

Dare drew a deep breath, trying to jump-start his heart again and glanced at the windows. Not only were they tinted but now they were steamed up all the way around.

"Who's that?" Billie whispered rising up on her elbow, her eyes wide with worry. "You don't think it's Sweet's men, do you?"

"Not a chance. It's probably a guard. He probably heard us or saw the car rocking."

"Great. Why couldn't you have been content with just a plain old blowjob? Most men would have been." She pushed him aside and sat up.

"I'm not most men," he answered rather smugly. "You ought to realize that by now."

"All right, you, whoever you are in there. Come on out here, now." The knocking sounded again at the windows, this time with a great deal more force.

"Well, damn," Billie said and hauled herself out of the seat.

"Where are you going?" he demanded when she picked up her leotard. She didn't answer but with great aplomb opened the door and stepped out of the van in only her black lace thong panties. There was nothing for Dare to do but follow.

"Holy Mother, Mary and Joseph," the hefty, graying man outside the van said and crossed himself, but his eyes roamed over Billie's body like a hungry hound dog eying a T-bone steak. Dare thought about bashing both his eyes, but forced himself to concentrate on straightening his own clothes.

"What the hell were you doing in my van?" another voice demanded and a beefy, red-faced man took a step forward.

"I'm terribly sorry, my good man," Billie said smoothly as she slid one slender leg into her leotard. "As you can see, we were rather indisposed."

"Indisposed, hell," the outraged owner cried. "You were fucking in my minivan."

"Actually, we did test the back seat," Dare said pulling up his jeans.

"Hey, pal, you've got some pretty bad scratches on your behind. You ought to have them looked at," the guard reported.

Dare smiled. "Thank you. I'll be sure to do that." He turned back to the car's owner. "As for your backseat, I'd recommend you add a bit more width. It was rather difficult to get enough push all cramped up like that, if you know what I mean."

"You bastard." The man's florid face turned even redder.

"Uh-oh, Dare." Billie pulled on her second shoe and pointed in the direction of the central door. "Trouble." She grabbed her ammo bag and looked around for her gun.

A well-dressed man, surrounded by broad-shouldered musclemen in cheap suits, had entered the hall. He paused to talk to the guards, introducing himself and his men.

"Who is that?" Dare asked quietly, his wary gaze on the car owner who was searching for something, possibly a weapon.

"Charlie Sweet," Billie said, her gaze pinned on the men at the door.

The car owner had found what he was looking for. He lifted one of the stanchions that held the red velvet rope and charged toward them. Of one accord, Dare and Billie scooted away, dodging behind a sleek black SUV. The man behind them dropped the stanchion. It made a loud clanging noise that drew the attention of the men at the door.

"There they are," a man yelled and the race was on. Dare and Billie ran for all they were worth, weaving in and around the other displays. The sound of shots reverberated through the hall.

"Hey, don't do that," A guard shouted in outrage. "What are you guys doing with guns?"

No one was listening. Another shot whizzed past Dare's ear and he dropped flat beside a flame-red Porsche GT2. Billie fell on top of him.

"Now what the hell do we do?" she demanded. "We can't shoot back, I got the ammo bag but we left our weapons in the minivan."

"You didn't grab the guns?" Dare demanded angrily.

"Didn't you?" Billie snapped back, her green eyes brilliant with angry lights. Dare cursed.

"I thought we'd be in less trouble if we didn't come out of the minivan armed to the teeth like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid."

"A stupid choice, Stefanos. You got us into this mess, now you get us out." Billie glared down at him, her small chin set in a stubborn line.

"I'll think of something," he said looking around frantically. She was still lying on top of him, her full breasts pressing into his chest, which made thinking a lot harder than it needed to be.

"You should think with your other head," she snarled, wriggling against his hardon.

"Just give me a minute." He peered beneath the car, trying to see their pursuers. Something registered in his mind but didn't click at first then he jerked his head around and looked again.

A key! He blinked, unable to believe their good fortune.

"Billie," he said, pushing her off so he could turn and wedge his shoulder under the car far enough to reach his find. "We are about to take a test drive."

"What the hell are you talking about?" she demanded.

He dislodged the key and showed it to her. "Get in the car."

"Are you nuts? You don't even know if that will work and even if does, what do you think you're going to do? Just drive right out of here?"

"Can you think of anything better?" he asked getting to his feet in a low crouch. He opened the door and held it for her. "After you, madam."

"I must be the nutty one to climb into another car with you," she said. "If we'd just stayed quiet when we were in the minivan, no one would have ever thought to look for us there, but no, you have to get all amorous and physical." The whole time she was complaining she was climbing into the low-slung car and maneuvering around the box shift leaving him with an unimpeded view of her very shapely ass.

"Stay low," he whispered. She rolled into a ball in the passenger seat. He slid into the driver seat, inserted the key, pumped the gas and turned the ignition. The motor purred to life. At first, he wasn't sure the car was even running, then he noticed the slight vibration in the seat, just enough to let him know he had a powerful engine at his disposal. "I wonder how many rpms this baby has going from standing to sixty in a minute."

"There they are," someone shouted. A bullet shattered the side mirror.

"Don't shoot," someone yelled. "You'll hit the cars. Christ Almighty!"

"This might be a good time to try out those rpms," Billie said and clicked on her seat belt.

Dare took her at her word. He floored the purring tiger.

"Hold on," he yelled as the car leaped forward bouncing off the foot-high stage like it was nothing and landing with a jolt. Dare kept the pedal pressed to the floor and the car zoomed away toward the plate glass windows near the central doors.

"We can't get out this way," Billie yelled. "There's no exit."

Dare wished for his gun, then remembered his ankle pistol. Grabbing it from its hidden holster, he hung out the side window and aimed at the plate glass they were barreling toward. A single bullet drilled its pristine surface which crackled like the shell of an Easter egg on a bad day then fell apart. The safety glass didn't fall, but a few more shots destroyed its integrity so it barely held together. It was the best he could do.

"Hold on. We're going through," Dare yelled and cranked up the Porsche's turbocharged engine as they sped toward the opening.

# **Chapter Five**

Dare had thought about taking up flying, but he'd always assumed it would be in a Cessna Citation or a Piper Cub. He'd never dreamed about a fire-engine red Porsche 996 GT2 with the reputation of a widow-maker. He wouldn't be surprised if they cost the same, but he didn't have time to contemplate the difference in price right this moment. The crackled plate glass window was directly ahead of them and now he was aware of a foot-high base of wall just below. Could the Porsche take it? He didn't think so, not with its ground-hugging nose. He roared past looking for another exit.

"Son of a bitch," Billie screamed, scrunching down in her seat, while Sweet's men emptied their guns at them as they whooshed past. At the last minute, Dare noticed a ramp had been left at one side of the aisle with a good fifteen feet between it and the cracked window. It might help. God, he hoped so.

Without thinking, he aimed for it, otherwise he'd lose his nerve and he wasn't sure why the hell he was here anyway. How did he get on the wrong side of the law so quickly and worse on Charlie Sweet's bad side as well? The reason was sitting right beside him, her arms clamped over her head while a stream of curse words such as he'd never heard uttered by a female before spilled from her rosebud mouth.

"You're not going to make it," Billie screamed bracing her feet against the floor board.

"Watch me," Dare shouted and prayed he wasn't just bragging in the wind. They hit the ramp doing sixty, it lifted the nose of the car and he floored the gas pedal. The Porsche soared, aimed right at the window. The plate glass shattered raining shards of safety glass all around them.

"What are you doing?" Billie shouted indicating the wheel which he was still frantically steering.

"We'll be landing soon, I want to be ready," he yelled and at that moment the tires touched down. The car lurched and headed for the twelve-foot drop off onto the southbound on-ramp to I-75. Dare stood on the brakes and wrenched the wheel. The Porsche screamed in protest as its glossy side panel came into contact with the iron railings.

"Let 'em hold," Dare prayed and fought the wheel. He heard steel tearing away, then they were clear, turning back into the wide driveway. He stomped the gas pedal and the sleek machine wheezed like a drunk on a two-week bender, then leaped ahead. He had no time to check for traffic. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. No one was chasing them yet, but he knew they soon would be. They tore around the corner, ran up the on-ramp for I-75 and headed north of the city. The Porsche was shimmying like a bad belly dancer. Dare took the next exit and headed downtown. They drove in silence, getting their bearings.

"Grosse Pointe," Billie said, looking out the window. "Jeez, what are you doing here?"

"Trying to get us out of danger," he snapped. They blew by a squad car which gave immediate chase.

"Cop," Billie reported. "We can outrun him."

"You're damn straight. I'd bet on a Porsche any day over a Crown Vic."

They were silent for a moment, listening to the squad car's siren.

"He's gaining on us," Billie said twisting in her seat.

"Can't be." Dare glanced at the speedometer. Their speed was dropping. "What the hell?"

"We're out of gas," she said pointing to the gauge. "They don't put much in these cars for the show." By this time, the car was rolling to a slow stop. The squad car drew up behind them.

"Pull over to the side and get out with your hands raised," the cop ordered through his bullhorn.

Dare glanced at Billie. "We don't have much choice."

"You're still a policeman. You can explain."

"Thanks for remembering that," he said with a good amount of sarcasm. "I doubt if this guy's going to believe me." He glanced in the side mirror at the cop approaching from the rear, his police special firmly gripped in both hands. "He's sure not coming up here to give me a ticket."

"Get out of the car and put your hands behind your head," the cop called and with a final glance at Billie, Dare opened the door and got out.

"I'm sorry, officer, were we going too fast?" he asked, then did a double take when he saw the young cop standing there. "Howie, thank god, you're here," he called and started to take his hands down.

"Hands up," Officer Bill Howard said, strengthening his request with a wave of his gun.

"Officer Howard, don't you remember me? I was at the Udall estate earlier today. Detective Dare Stefanos?"

The officer must have recognized him because he relaxed his stance, lowering his gun slightly. "What are you doing here, sir?" he asked, looking confused.

"We were being chased by bad guys who were shooting at us," Dare explained.

"That's not what came over the radio. They said someone had stolen a Porsche from the car show." He glanced at the car and for a moment, his face reflected admiration for

the sleek lines then shock at the damage. At that moment Billie opened her side door and got out. Officer Howard's gun came up.

"Hands behind your head," he ordered, once again going into his shooting stance.

"Don't worry, Howie, this is a friend of mine."

The officer studied her for a moment and seemed about to relax again, when a light dawned in his eyes.

"I know who you are," he said, taking a few steps. "You're that woman wanted for the murder of Mr. Udall."

"Nah, Howie, they got it all wrong. This here's Billie Stone. She wouldn't kill anybody." Howard looked at him doubtfully.

"You see, Howie, they thought she was the one, but since then they've got new evidence that shows she was nowhere near the place."

"I'm sorry, sir. I still have to take you both in," the young officer said determinedly.

"No you don't," Dare argued. He began a long involved story and Howard was listening, his gaze pinned on Dare who was so busy weaving his tale, he didn't notice Billie until it was too late. Out of the corner of his eye, Dare saw her reach into her ammo bag, then her arm rose and fell in a perfect roundhouse pitch as she lobbed something at the cop car.

"What are you doing?" Dare shouted.

"A diversion, so I can escape." The explosion drowned out the rest of her words. Open-mouthed, Dare watched as the police cruiser lifted off the cement, did a half turn end over end and came down before it landed on its roof, its tires spinning uselessly.

"My cruiser!" Howie howled, clamping his hands over his head.

"How the hell did you do that?" Dare shouted at Billie.

"Grenade," she yelled over her shoulder as she took off running. The flaming cruiser was sliding right toward them, the sound of metal against cement heralding its approach.

"Holy shit! Run," Dare shouted at the distracted young cop and both men sprinted down the street. The cruiser chased them, sparks flying, until it reached the Porsche where metal tangled with metal and the cruiser slid to a stop.

"Holy shit!" Howard echoed Dare's words, his voice breaking in disbelief, his freckled young face shiny with sweat and excitement. "She blew up my car!"

People came rushing to the scene, drawn by the explosion and resultant fire.

"Hey, Howie, you need to get these people cleared away from here before the gas tanks blow," Dare advised and watched the kid visibly shake off the miasma that had claimed him. He finally started acting like a cop again ordering the onlookers back just in time. The fire reached the gas tanks and exploded, sending car parts in every direction. People screamed and took off running while metal rain fell all around.

#### Dirty Little Secrets

Dare stood on the sidewalk and glanced around, searching for a small woman with a halo of blonde hair and a bag of grenades. She'd done it this time. He figured she wasn't ever going to draw the get-out-of-jail-free card again. But, not to worry. For the moment, Billie Stone had disappeared.

\* \* \* \* \*

She figured she had one chance. Go see Charlie Sweet. It would be dangerous, but she couldn't see any other way. She could keep running, but he was ruthless in his pursuit as he'd already shown and he wouldn't stop until he had her. If she talked to him, told him she didn't care he'd killed Udall and she wasn't going to rat him out to the cops, maybe he'd leave her alone.

The part of her brain that came to that conclusion was feeling desperate and grasping at straws. The other part was scoffing at her naivety that she could even consider confronting the devil in his lair. Charlie would never accept her explanation. He wouldn't want to have an eyewitness out there running loose who could turn him in on a whim.

Sitting on a bench overlooking the river on Belle Isle she considered all her options again and came up with the same answer. She had to talk to Charlie, she had to negotiate some kind of deal, or she was dead. Having decided what must be done, she mapped out a plan of action, where she'd find him, the best time to approach him and how to get in to see him without getting herself blown away.

Going straight in seemed the best. If she showed up, unarmed, Charlie would be curious. He'd look for her to offer him money, to try to buy her way out of her trouble and he was greedy enough to listen to what she had to say, even to take her money, but she could never be certain he'd not renege. Look what he'd done to his boss, Sam Udall.

Too bad she couldn't sneak a grenade in with her, she'd blow the bastard to hell and back, but she'd be searched. Sighing, she rose and walked back to the bridge that connected the island to the rest of the city.

Charlie's hangout was the Dizzy Goose, a low-class strip bar down on Ninth Street. It was generally known he had an office in the back room with a game table and a cot which got a regular workout by Charlie and his men and the various strippers who worked there. The bar was also known to run numbers, take bets and do some heavy gambling in that same back room.

Billie hitched a ride downtown, reeducated the ten-armed sleazebag who thought giving a girl a ride meant getting a quick lay, and made her way down to Ninth Street. This was a rough part of town. She knew it well from her childhood. She left her ammo bag in the rubble-strewn yard of a burnt-out house left over from Detroit's last Devil's Night.

Her heart was pounding as she approached the Dizzy Goose, but she psyched herself up to a tough façade. She had to go in hard-hitting as an equal who wasn't afraid of anything, more like a businessman who was interested in maintaining peace for the sake of his business as usual. Okay, so she wasn't as tough as she sometimes pretended she was. She wished like hell she had her Dominator and strangely enough, she wished Dare Stefanos had her back.

She opened the door which was reinforced with steel latticework and stepped inside. The square of sunlight at the entrance was quickly dispelled when the door slammed shut behind her. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the gloom and when they did, she wished they hadn't. A bar ran down one side of the room and on the other a poorly lit stage offered the dubious talents of half-naked dancers twining themselves around metal poles in tired simulations of sexual ecstasy, their petulant expressions displaying boredom, their naked buttocks mooning the few customers seated at battered tables.

At first, everyone seemed frozen, watching her like new meat in a butcher's display case, then a huge, bald man with bulging steroid biceps and a pimpled face shuffled across the room toward her.

"What d'ya want?" he demanded abruptly.

"I'm here to see Charlie Sweet," she answered giving him an eyeball to eyeball look. He didn't need to know her mouth was so dry she couldn't have spit if the place was on fire.

"Don't know him," Baldy grunted.

"Check in the back room," she said, keeping her gaze and her voice level. They did a stare down which she finally won. He took out a cell phone and punched in some numbers.

"Bitch here to see Charlie," he muttered, sucking in his lips like he was feeding on himself. He listened and raised his gaze back to her.

"What's your name?"

"Billie." She kept her pose self-assured, tough and undeterred.

Baldy closed up his phone and motioned with his head. "Back there."

She gave him the look for another second or two, just to make it clear she wasn't to be fooled around with and crossed the room with a deliberate gait that said she wasn't messing with anyone and they'd better not mess with her. At least that's what she hoped she conveyed, but she couldn't help thinking if she couldn't have her Dominator or Dare, she'd give anything for a pair of stilettos.

The back door opened before she got there by a lowlife with his arm in a sling. He scowled at her with more than normal animosity and she surmised he'd been one of the men who'd attacked her this morning at her building. She looked him in the eyes and grinned. His complexion reddened, and his gaze jumped from side to side as if he didn't know what to do if he couldn't take out his gun and shoot her.

"Search her," he ordered Baldy who set about with way too much enthusiasm. When his hands lingered on her breasts, she growled, baring her teeth and he backed off. She figured with the steroids, his hormones were already fried anyway.

### Dirty Little Secrets

Charlie Sweet was seated at a scratched wooden desk as beat-up looking and ugly as he was. She was surprised, figuring he might have wanted something a bit more impressive since he was planning to take over from his dead partner. He didn't say anything when she approached, just sat and studied her with dark eyes as stone cold and expressionless as a shark's.

She came to a halt in front of the desk and looked around for a chair. Three men were seated around a table strewn with decks of cards at the other side of the office. Obviously, no one was going to rush to get a chair for her, so she turned to meet Charlie's dead-shark stare and waited. He knocked ash off the foul smelling cigar he was smoking and grimaced.

"I'll tell you what, girlie," he said finally, his voice gruff and guttural. "I ain't got much use for bitches except for screwing and making me money. Which is it?"

"I don't screw except for my own pleasure," she informed him, "so that should answer both your questions."

"Then what are you doing taking up my time?" He glared at someone behind her. "Boyd, get me a beer."

The man with his arm in a sling left the table, opened the battered refrigerator in the corner and grabbed a bottle of beer. His expression looked like he could kill someone given half a chance and she wasn't real clear whether it would have been her or his boss. The way he slammed the bottle down on the battered desk and headed back to the table made her think it might be Sweet. She guessed she wouldn't want to be ordered around like a kangaroo by a dumb, ugly gangster who had no loyalty for even his partner.

For half a moment she applauded Boyd, whoever he was, for his character, then snorted when she reminded herself none of these men possessed one ounce of character. They were losers in the worst kind of way and she was here to deal with a loser who could take her out without a qualm, so what did that make her?

The self examination pissed her off, so she glared at Charlie.

"I'm here to clear up a misconception," she growled, crossing her arms over her chest. That made Sweet raise his gaze to meet her eyes again. Bushy, black brows drew down in a scowl.

"What makes you think you can clear up anything having to do with me?" He puffed on his foul-smelling cigar and she blew air through her nose to keep from coughing.

"Because your men have been harassing me," she said without inflection. "They invaded my building, damaged my doors and vandalized my interior. I want recompense for the damage and I want your assurance it won't happen again."

"And if I don't give you this assurance?" He actually grinned, a feat she'd thought was beyond the likes of him, but sure enough amusement radiated from his knobby face. He'd also affected a bit of gentility, holding his damp cigar daintily between thumb and forefinger with the pinkie raised. Billie had to shake her head not to be distracted.

"If you don't work with me on this, you'll be missing out on a good business opportunity."

"Such as?" He took another long drag on his cigar, blew the smoke out and propped his fat, scarred chin on one thumb while he regarded her through narrowed eyes.

"Such as my reassurance that when I was at Sam Udall's residence a few nights ago, I didn't observe anything that would put anyone in danger with the law and to back that I'm offering a sum of a half-million dollars."

"A half-million dollars?" He flicked his ash, a stalling tactic, she was sure, while he considered her words. His gaze darted to the men seated at the table, no more than a flicker of the eyes, but she felt her back muscles tighten. "That's what Sam said someone skimmed from him."

She nodded. "So I heard." She waited.

"So you lose all your profit. That don't sound like good business to me."

"Sometimes profit is not measured in dollars," she said with steely calm. She was getting the heebie-jeebies and turned slightly so she could keep both Charlie and his men in her sights. "So what's it to be? Do you want your men to keep harassing me or do you want a half-million dollars transferred to your private account?"

"And what do I have to do for this largesse?" She was surprised he knew the meaning of the word, but he had been hanging around with Sam Udall and some of the man's polish must have begun to rub off somewhere, although she couldn't see it yet.

"You just have to control your men so they leave me alone," she said and smiled sweetly. "After all, Charlie, you and me, we've never crossed paths before, so we know this town is big enough for the two of us."

His eyelashes flickered. Behind her she heard the scrape of a chair against linoleum. Her leg muscles tightened and she looked around for an escape. Apparently, that was only through the door she'd come in because the one window the room sported had bars over it.

Sweet slid open a desk drawer and stuck his hand inside, shoe leather sounded behind her. She started to panic. Darting around the desk, she kneed the drawer shut on Sweet's beefy hand and ignoring his bellow of pain, wrapped her arm around his fat neck, positioning herself behind him so she had a hammerlock on him. His men had drawn guns but now they hesitated, waiting for an opening. In that moment, she kicked Sweet's hand out of the drawer and reached for the gun. Not a Dominator, but a meanlooking automatic pistol that was small enough for her to hold one handed. She pressed the barrel against Sweet's meaty neck.

"Hold it, boys," she ordered. They scowled and looked like they wanted to rush her, but she moved the barrel slightly and fired, taking off Sweet's left earlobe. He screamed and clamped a hand to his ear. "Oops," she said lightly. "Don't make me nervous. It might go off again." Charlie waved away his guys. The door flew inward and Baldy stood in the opening, his big dumb face blank and confused.

"Welcome, come join us," Billie invited, waving him toward the other men. "While you're here, collect the weapons and put them in the refrigerator." Baldy glared at her then looked to his boss who was cursing and trying to stem the flow of blood. Billie pressed the gun to the back of his head.

"Man, I'd hate to have this thing go off now," she said. "And it could. Then all my troubles would be over and I'd get to keep my half a million."

"Do what she says," Sweet ordered and reluctantly Baldy gathered the weapons from the other men and carried them to the refrigerator.

"Ah-ah-ah," she said when he shifted so his body was blocking her view. "All of them."

"Do what she says, god-dammit," Sweet roared. Baldy slammed the refrigerator door shut and turned back to her, his hands in plain sight.

"That's a good doobie," she said and poked Charlie. "We're going to take a walk now."

He cussed long and furious, his face red, his neck and shoulder coated in blood. "You ain't ever getting out of this city alive," he warned.

"Maybe not, Charlie, but you aren't ever getting your hands on my half a million and if I can help it, you'll never get me. I offered a peaceful settlement, but you chose to do it this way. Remember that when you're down for the count. Now let's get out of here." She pulled back only far enough for him to push his bulk out of the squeaky desk chair and followed as he stumbled toward the door. His men shuffled around, their arms outstretched as if about to block a gridiron play.

"Have a seat, boys," she ordered and waited while they settled back around the table. She threw the door open and looked out into the bar. Most of the patrons weren't even paying attention to what was going on. The strippers still gyrated on stage, the beer guzzlers seated at the table barely noticed them. Only the bartender looked alert and ready for trouble. He had his hands below the bar.

"Bring it out and throw it on the floor," she ordered, burying her gun in Sweet's neck roll.

"Do what she says, god-dammit," he repeated what had become his new mantra.

The bartender brought out a sawed-off shotgun and heaved it over the bar. It landed on the floor with a clatter. His hands went back behind the bar.

"Give me the handgun," Billie said, jabbing at Sweet's neck. She was getting nervous. She was losing her edge, she knew that. Any minute, the guys seated in the office were going to get their butts in gear and retrieve their weapons and there was going to be a classic OK Corral shootout. She didn't give much for her chances. "Give me your pistol," she screamed and let off a shot right next to Charlie's right ear. On

stage, the dancers finally halted their gyrations and stood staring in the direction of the shots, their open palms protecting their bare buttocks. Customers dove for cover behind tables and chairs.

"Jesus Christ," Sweet yelled clamping his hand to that ear. He was visibly relieved to see he still had his lobe intact.

"If you ever want to wear an earring again, tell him to throw down the other gun."

By this time the bartender had complied. A nasty-looking Beretta Vertec came sliding down the bar. Billie shifted and grabbed the weapon and stood two-fisted while she glared around the room. No one else seemed inclined to give her a problem. In the office, she heard a yell and chairs scraping.

"Time to leave," she said and gave Sweet a kick in his fat behind. He staggered back toward his office and tumbled into the first man who cleared the door. His weight was such that it set off a bowling pin effect and he and his men toppled over onto the floor.

Billie didn't stay for more. She sprinted for the door, grabbed the knob and yanked. Nothing happened. It was locked. She glanced back at the bartender who was doing a leap over the bar toward his weapon. His face bore a look of triumph. The son of a bitch had a lock on the door that would only release when he pressed the button. She didn't have time to discuss it with him. She fired two bullets into the lock, snatched the door open and was out in the fading twilight headed toward the street.

She remembered her bag, and veered toward the burnt-out yard. A homeless man stood holding her open bag, staring down into it with puzzlement. She grabbed it as she ran past and took refuge behind a parked car, just as the first bullets split the sultry air. The vagrant dropped and crawled toward the next yard where he hid behind a rotting wooden fence.

Sweet's men spilled out of the bar, guns blazing in all directions. The bartender was a little more direct. He took aim and fired at the car where Billie was hiding. He clipped the window and took aim again. If he hit the gas tank, she didn't have a chance, she'd be Southern fried chicken. She dug into her bag of goodies, took out a grenade, pulled the pin and lobbed it toward the bar. Her aim was better than she could have hoped. It landed in the doorway.

"What the hell?" someone yelled and the grenade went off. The gunmen were blown off their feet while the whole front end of the bar was splintered into nothingness leaving the interior exposed.

Billie lobbed her last grenade and took off running toward the end of Ninth Street. Footsteps pounded behind her. She was light and fast but she couldn't be sure they wouldn't catch her. There were too many of them. She ran into the middle of the intersection. A sedan veered and came to a stop. The driver, a large African-American woman with big hair, rolled down the passenger window and stared at her.

"Honey, are you all right? I nearly hit you—" She broke off when she caught sight of the guns Billie still clutched in her hands. The window started to slide up again, but

Billie made a dive for the door and wrenched it open. The woman screamed and threw up her hands.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Just go," Billie ordered.

The woman worked her vermillion mouth until gunshots roared and pellets scored the hood of her car.

"My, my, my!" she cried and floored the gas pedal. At first, the car veered toward a parked car, then the woman grabbed the steering wheel and aimed down the street. Billie twisted in the seat and watched as the bartender gained the corner and raced after them on foot. At the next intersection, the woman screeched around the corner and floored it again. Neither of them spoke for several blocks.

"Are you all right?" the woman asked again, her huge bosom heaving, her eyes rolling.

"Yeah. I'm sorry about your car."

"That's nothing. I've got good insurance for my car. It's me I ain't got covered," she waved long red nails with tiny butterflies painted on them in front of her face. "Honey, you got yourself some bad enemies."

"Yeah, I guess I have."

"You better get yourself out of town."

"You're probably right." Billie slumped in the corner, wondering what the hell she could do, where she could go. She thought of Dare.

"My name's Marcelline Hamilton," the woman said. "Where do you want me to drop you?"

"Anywhere along here would be fine," Billie answered tiredly. It seemed a year since she'd wakened in Dare's bed.

"No way," Marcelline said. "This here's a bad neighborhood and those bad men aren't that far behind us. You tell me where you want to go and I'll just take you there."

"I don't know," Billie answered. She thought of Dare again. "No, wait. Take me to Howard Street."

"You got somebody there who'll take care of you?" Marcelline asked.

"Yeah," Billie said. "I do."

# \* \* \* \* \*

"You're thinking with your dick!"

Homicide detective Phil Merkel glared at Dare. "I know you're screwing the little bitch and that's why you let her get away!" They were in one of the interrogation rooms at police headquarters. A tape recorder rested on the table between them.

"I didn't *let* her get away. Officer Howard did." Dare sent the young, pale-faced officer a glance of apology.

"Sh-she blew up my car and made a getaway while I was trying to move everyone out of the way."

"That's right," Dare said quickly. "I'm telling you, he was a fucking hero. We ought to be glad to have such men on the force." He grinned at Bill Howard who returned the smile.

"Tell me where she is," Merk said in a tough, level voice that showed his patience had long since left him.

"Honest to god, Phil," Dare leaned back in his chair and spread his hands wide. "If I knew where she was, I'd tell you, because I think she's in a lot of danger."

*"She's* in danger?"

"Whoever killed Sam Udall is after her. She was a witness."

"Witness, hell," Merk bellowed. "She's the murderer. We can prove she was there."

"You're way ahead of yourself, Merk. Just think about it, why would she kill him?" Dare waited for him to answer.

"She caught him with the Senator's daughter."

"And she blew him away like Frankie and Johnny. Give me a break. My guess is that Billie's a con artist, a scammer, but not a murderer. She's been alone ever since she was a kid. She had a Latin stud living with her. What did she need Sam for? My guess would be for one thing and one thing only – his money and that she could get without meeting him face to face, probably by hacking into his computer." He paused as if waiting for Merk to agree. When he didn't, Dare rushed on.

"I'm telling you, Phil, she's smart, smarter than you and me put together. She knew how to scam him and she did it. The how doesn't really matter. The point is she was there that night to cover her tracks and got caught up in what happened. I'd wager a month's pay she was hiding out in that closet in the computer room. Why don't you check it for fingerprints?"

"So what would that prove? We already have her flashlight proving she was there, so what if she went in the closet. Maybe she was searching for something."

"What if she was crouched on the floor, peering through the slats? Did you ever think about that? Maybe she saw who did the killing and they're out to get her. Check it out, for god's sake."

Phil sighed. "All right. I'll do that. Now you tell me where she is."

"I would if I could, but I can't."

"God damn it," the detective roared. "I don't need this shit from you, Dare. I want your cooperation."

"And you've had it, but you want more from me than I can give. Look, I found her at her building last night. I helped her escape some guys who were trying their damndest to kill her. She didn't have anywhere to go, so I took her back to my place. When I woke up, she was gone. I went looking for her again and found her back at her building. Once again I helped her outrun some guys who were gunning for her. Then

# Dirty Little Secrets

Officer Howard caught up with us and insisted he was going to arrest her and she just...just..." He threw up his hands while he stumbled over the memory of the squad car lifting off the pavement. "Well, she took off," he finished lamely and swiped a hand through his hair. "And I don't have a clue of where to even begin to look for her." He got to his feet. "Now, I've had a tough day and if you aren't arresting me, then I'm leaving."

"Don't leave town," Merkel said like he didn't even believe he was uttering the words.

"Trust me, I won't. I'm going to a burger joint and then back to my apartment. In case the thought hadn't already crossed your mind, you can have someone follow me."

"Get out of here," Merk grumbled and turned his back on him. Dare didn't wait for a second invitation to leave. On his way out, he overheard two beat cops talking about a bar on Ninth Street that had been blown up with what looked like grenades.

It couldn't be, he told himself. Why would she blow up a bar in that part of town? He paused on the front steps and looked around as if in a daze, his thoughts still on the unnamed bar reported to have blown up. A cold, misty rain fell against his face, clearing his mind. He'd been inside longer than he'd realized. Darkness had fallen and streetlights were lit. Hunching his shoulders against the dampness, he walked down to the corner and crawled into the first empty cab.

"Where you going?" the driver shouted over the blaring music of Shakira. Dare directed him to the street where he'd parked his car that morning and drove down to Elizabeth Street where he picked up a gyro and headed back to his apartment.

He knew she was back, even before he closed the apartment door behind him. The radio was playing in his bedroom, the sound low, the music easy. A lamp cast pools of light in the living room and through the bedroom door.

"Honey, I'm home," he called softly, expecting her to come running, but nothing moved. All was still, too still. Just in case he was kidding himself, he threw his sandwich bag on the hall table and drew his pistol from his ankle holster. He crept along the hallway and dodged his head around the opening hoping to see her lolling on the bed. The room was empty. He swung around to look more closely. The hair on the back of his neck tingled.

Something hit against the back of his knees knocking him to the floor, he rolled, bringing his pistol around, his finger tightening on the trigger. A foot lashed out and his pistol went flying. His assailant launched at him. Dare fielded by bringing up his knees and catapulting the attacker over his head. He landed on his back in the middle of the bedroom floor and lay stunned. Dare took no time to reassess the situation. He leaped to his feet and threw himself on the sprawled body. Hands came up to scratch at his cheek, but Dare captured them. Only then did he feel the smallness and soft femininity of his assailant.

"Billie?" he asked, still holding her hands in a vise grip. He could feel her relax beneath him. "Why the hell are you attacking me?"

"Dare!" All her relief was in that one word. "I thought you might be one of Sweet's men." She pushed him aside and sat up, then threw her arms around him and held on for dear life. He could feel her buff little body trembling against his and all kinds of memories flooded him.

"What would Sweet's men be doing here in my apartment?" he asked, tightening his arms around her. She pulled back and looked at him.

"You're right, of course. They don't really know who you are. For all they know, you could just be someone I hired as a bodyguard." She shook her head and ran her hands over her face in a weary gesture. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking, just reacting."

"What's got you reacting?" He got to his feet and pulled her up. "Where did you go after you blew up the squad car?"

"I knew I had to find someplace safe and think things through so I headed for Belle Isle. I'm starving to death, and you haven't got anything in your cupboards or your refrigerator except something black in your vegetable bin which looks like its growing legs."

"It's my penicillin experiment. You didn't bother it, did you?" he joked, inordinately glad to see her. "Come on, I got a sandwich. I'll share it with you." He led her back to the kitchen. "Want some Irish Coffee?"

"I want anything that won't give me ptomaine poisoning."

Whistling, Dare started the drip coffeemaker and headed to the front hall to retrieve the sandwich and chips he'd bought. He didn't want to think about his excessive good cheer. If anyone had asked, he'd just tell them it was because he knew he had some great sex coming his way, but he knew it was more than that.

"What is that? It smells wonderful," Billie said sniffing at the paper bag.

"Ah-ah. Get a couple of paper plates."

She hurried to comply, dividing the sandwich and chips equally and watched impatiently while he filled two coffee cups. He added a generous jolt of Irish whiskey to each and joined her at the bar.

"Dig in," he said, chuckling at the greedy look on her face. She didn't wait to be told again, wolfing down the half a sandwich without one sign of daintiness or embarrassment. He had meant to use the time discussing their day apart, but decided with her mouth full she wouldn't be much good at answering his questions. She finished first and glanced at his plate measuringly.

"Don't even think about it," he said edging the plate away from her.

"Okay." She picked up her coffee cup and sipped with considerably more constraint than she'd shown with her food. Dare finished quickly and picked up the paper plates.

"Don't disturb yourself, I'll do the dishes," he quipped, depositing them in the waste can before settling down beside her again. She smiled at his silly joke, her face

relaxed, her eyes almost dreamy. The whiskey was working. She no longer looked like some crazed zookeeper whose animals had all been let out.

"You're not the same bad-ass girl who attacked me earlier," he commented.

"Which goes to show how easily I can be had," she answered, glancing at him lazily from beneath her lashes.

"Where'd you go after you ran away from Officer Howard and me?" He studied the display of emotions across her face. She caught him watching her and tipped her nose in the air.

"Don't try to outwit me, Dare. It won't happen."

"Yeah, so I've discovered, but I put my badge on the line for you several times today and I figure I deserve an answer." He couldn't help sounding petulant. He felt that way.

"That and more," she said contemplatively. She drew a deep breath and blew it out, then sipped her Irish coffee and finally met his gaze.

"Like I said I went to Belle Isle to think."

"And?"

"And I came up with a plan of action, a very bad plan of action as it turned out." She ceased talking and sipped her coffee, her gaze fixed on some distant spot on the wall.

"So are you going to share this bad plan of action?"

She shook herself. "I decided I should go talk to Charlie Sweet in person and make a deal with him."

"You...? Holy Christ, Princess, but you have a death wish."

"Yeah, I guess I do. Anyway, the plan didn't work, so I left and came here." She ran a slender finger around the rim of her cup and popped it in her mouth.

"Did you leave before or after you blew up the place?" He fixed her with his gaze.

"You heard about that?" She looked uncomfortable for a moment, then shrugged. "Actually, I did it on the way out. It was the only way I could escape without getting my ass blown away. There were five of them to one of me."

"That hardly seems fair odds," he observed. "The poor guys just didn't know what they were up against." He paused a long moment. "You know you can't just go around blowing up things."

"I know." She blew out her cheeks and shot him an annoyed glare. "Okay, I get it that you're exasperated with me, but I thought if I took off on my own, I'd save you any more grief and I could bury myself on the streets. I couldn't do that with you tagging along. You look like a cop."

"I am a cop."

"That's just my point." Her eyebrows drew down in angry slashes over snapping emerald-green eyes. "I can take care of myself, Dare. You don't need to baby me or try to protect me."

"Oh, you mean you didn't need my help when I took out those two lookouts huddled on the roof of your building?" he asked, getting to his feet to lean across the counter at her. "And you didn't need my help at the car show when Sweet and his men were shooting at you? If it hadn't been for me, we never would have gotten out of there alive or have you forgotten that little fact?"

"Or maybe I wouldn't have ended up in the car show in the first place." She'd gotten to her feet and met him toe-to-toe and eye-to-eye, across the counter. "Maybe I would have gone directly to a better hideaway."

"Why didn't you then?" he challenged.

"Because," she waved her hands in dismissal. "Because you were dragging me around like a grounded Superman who'd lost his cape and couldn't fly, so I thought you knew what you were doing."

"I did."

"Until you got horny," she reminded him with a sneer.

"I didn't see you objecting," he sneered back. "Give you a little mayhem and murder and you turn into an insatiable nymphomaniac."

She put her hands on her hips and opened her mouth no doubt to blister the hide from his bones, but their gazes clashed and suddenly they were in each other's arms. He dragged her up on the counter so he could reach her better, molding her to his own body. His cock ached with the rapidity of his hard-on. His mouth angled across hers in a demanding kiss. He couldn't get enough of her taste, her smell.

"Damn," he moaned. "I'm out of condoms."

"What? I thought you had an inexhaustible supply."

"No, dammit."

She was breathless and hot, her mouth open for him, her tongue jabbing and challenging. "So do we need them? I'm clean and healthy. And I make damn sure anyone I sleep with is as well. How about you?"

"Up until last year I was married and I never cheated on my wife. Since then I had an affair with one of my coworkers. Nothing since. I'm good," Dare said and kissed her again. At this rate his heart was going to pound out of his chest. What they'd done at the car show was just a quickie compared to what he had in mind no. Dare picked her up in his arms and headed for the bedroom.

"Where are you going?" she gasped.

"For once, I'm going to do it in a soft bed, with plenty of room and lots of time."

"I have to shower," she protested before jamming her tongue down his throat. Dare figured the mouth suction between the two of them could have peeled bricks off a building a half a block away. "You don't need a shower. I like the way you smell." He threw her on the bed. She twisted toward the edge.

"It won't take me but a minute."

"No time," he said hauling her trim little ass back to him. He peeled off her spandex bodysuit in the time it took her to think of another protest, then shucked out of his own pants and shorts. His hands were above his head trying to get his sweatshirt off when he felt something close around his cock. A ripple of pleasure raced up the hard length of his erection. He tossed aside the shirt and looked down. She'd hooked her thong around the base of his cock, which had restricted circulation enough so his erection was enormous and sensitive as hell. With one of her fingers, she drew tiny circles around the tip of his cock, then lowered her head and used her tongue to repeat the action.

Dare groaned and arched his back which sent his engorged cock reaching toward her with pathetic anticipation. She chuckled low in her throat and encased him in her mouth, applying the same kind of suction she'd done earlier when they kissed. Dare's knees buckled for a minute then he caught himself and laid her back on the bed. She was grinning.

"Come on, big boy," she cooed. "Come to your insatiable nymphomaniac."

She raised her legs and spread them wide baring herself to his gaze. Her pink clitoris glistened invitingly and he lowered his head and suckled her. She loosened her hold and shoved her legs upward pushing against his thrusting tongue and nipping teeth with a desperate rhythm.

She cried out, arching her body as she came and he moved up on her, ramming his cock into her swollen moist sheath, aiming for that mysterious G-spot women always talk about and men are never really sure exists. Dare, for one, thought it was a myth women liked to tease themselves with, but just in case, he wanted Billie to feel it. At the same time, he worked his hand between them and made tiny circles with his thumb on her clitoris. She arched so high, her tight buttocks weren't even touching the bed.

She screamed when she came again and bucked beneath him, trying to get away, trying to get closer, he wasn't sure which and she wasn't telling. She was too caught up in the moment and he held on as long as he could, then he spewed his semen into her cunt, which just made her buck some more. When he didn't have a drop left to give to the cause, they collapsed on the bed and lay in a hot, sweaty tangle of limbs and wet sheets. Billie was still cooing, her eyes closed, her lips curved in a soft smile that made her face more beautiful than he'd ever seen it. He lay watching her, thinking this moment was just about perfect, and that he'd never experienced it before.

He wasn't sure just when he fell asleep. He woke remembering there were questions he wanted to ask Billie and knowing she wasn't there for him to ask.

\* \* \* \* \*

She had to leave him again. She knew that when she heard the fire trucks. She looked out the window and saw the glow in the east, near Cobo Hall. The bastards had

burned her building. She didn't have to be down on the streets to be sure. He'd done it out of spite and retribution because she had blown up his bar. Turnabout was fair play, she supposed, but it opened up a whole new way of looking at things.

Charlie was going to kill her. That was a given now. He'd never stop until she was dead and he would destroy everyone and everything that got in his way. In a city of bad guys, he was the baddest and she'd just made him her number-one enemy. The problem was he was going to kill whomever tried to stop him, and she knew Dare. He would definitely try to stop Charlie.

She sighed, deep in her chest, shuddering a little at the thought of what she must do and that was leave Dare and never come near him again. Up to now, Charlie didn't know about him, but he'd find out soon enough. It was time for her to go. Wearily, she left the window and gathered up her clothing and carried it to the bathroom to dress. She longed for a hot shower, but she was afraid she'd wake up Dare. She stood in the doorway for a minute watching him sleep, a good-hearted, good-looking man who believed in old-fashioned virtues like protecting a woman no matter how depraved she was. She felt a dampness gathering in the corner of her eyes and jerked her head to fling them away.

She wasn't crying.

She never cried.

Down on the street, she wished she'd taken one of his jackets. The misty rain lent a damp chill that went right to the bone. She wrapped her arms around herself and jogged to warm up. All the time, her brain wondered where the hell she could go. She needed money. She had plenty of money. She just couldn't get to it, which was most frustrating of all. She almost laughed out loud. Her whole life long she'd been putting money back for a rainy day and now that it was a torrential downpour, she couldn't get to it. It was fate playing a dirty trick on her.

Well, this wasn't getting her anywhere. She had to find a place to hide out. Two blocks over from her burning building, she found a homeless shelter that hadn't closed its doors yet and still had an open bed. Gratefully, she took the rough army surplus blanket offered her and stumbled to the cot. Huddled under its meager warmth, she lay thinking of what to do next. She needed help. She, Billie Stone, who never needed anyone or anything, needed help. And the one man she could depend on to give that help had just been erased from the equation. She cared enough about Dare not to want to endanger him. But if not Dare, then who?

Carlos! The name came to her in a blinding flash. The bastard owed her. She'd go demand he return some of the money he'd taken from her. Once she had that, she could leave town, go someplace safe, retrieve her Barbados accounts, get her life organized again and forget about Detroit and its sleazeballs like Charlie Sweet. She could still have a life.

# Dirty Little Secrets

Hope bloomed in her chest. And maybe, one day, when some time had passed, she could contact Dare and he'd come to wherever she was and they'd... She went to sleep dreaming about a stubborn, dark-haired Greek with a scar and a sexy, crooked smile.

# Chapter Six

Rich people live differently than everyone else. Billie was sure someone had said that and if they hadn't, they should have.

Helen Savage lived in a penthouse condo in the top of the old Walker building which her father had once owned and which had housed Walker's department store, one of the giants that had dominated downtown Detroit in the early days much like Jacobsen's and Hudson's had done. Unlike the Hudson building which had been demolished sometime in the late eighties, the sturdier and more unique Walker building had withstood the razing ball and been renovated as part of the new city renaissance.

The snooty doorman, who appeared old enough to have been with the building from its beginning, looked Billie over with a critical eye before calling upstairs. She was as surprised as he appeared to be when the okay came down. Riding up in a glass and marble elevator, she told herself this was a bad idea, but something drove her to confront Carlos. Maybe she'd castrate him while she was at it.

The elevator slid to a stop as smooth as caramel molasses on a hot day, the doors opened and Carlos was there in all his Latino prime, his dark eyes holding secrets she guessed he'd never share with her again. He smiled, his teeth gleaming white against his dark skin and bowed. His leather pants were so tight she feared for his Latino pride.

"Ah, Lucy," he said, making his voice deep and smooth, like whipped chocolate. "I have missed you." He breathed into her ear, twisting his taut body like a toreador posturing before a bull, deliberate and balanced, dangerous and challenging. Oh, yes, she remembered the play and just in time she remembered this man had stolen an enormous amount of money from her and betrayed her to her enemies. She did a little posturing herself, entwining her leg around his and giving him a shove that landed him on his leather-clad ass.

"You bastard," she said in a low voice planting a knee on his chest and applying some pressure while one hand grabbed a fistful of white silk shirt. "You stripped me clean. You took every cent of money I had hidden, then you told Charlie where to find me."

"No, Lucy, I never..." His suave, cultured purr had changed to a nasally whine. "I would never do that to you. I-I took your money. I did not believe you would be so generous with your check, so I searched and..." He shrugged and offered a smile. Billie wasn't buying. She let her weight drop on her knee just enough for him to feel the pressure and saw a moment of panic in his dark eyes.

"Well, make up your mind, darling. Either kill him or let him up off my entry floor."

# Dirty Little Secrets

Billie looked up to see Helen Savage standing in the open doorway. The room behind her was dazzling with a huge chandelier that threw off prisms of light. Helen had changed her hair color. She was a redhead now and the color seemed garish against her pale, surgically tightened skin. She'd had so many face-lifts her eyes had an Asian tilt to them and her carmine lips had been pumped full of collagen to the point it seemed a very angry bee had been at work. She looked old and foolish.

Slowly, Billie got to her feet and faced the woman. Adversary was the word that came to mind. Draped in Chinese red silk, Helen circled Carlos like a protective viper, her gaze never leaving Billie's face, her swollen lips twisting into a leer.

"Welcome to my humble abode," she said, slurring her words just the tiniest bit. She was either drunk or high, Billie surmised. "I promise to be far more gracious than you were on our last meeting."

"You're a better woman for it," Billie said with a sneer that brought a momentary flash of anger to Helen's face.

"Carlos, do get up off the floor," she ordered without glancing at him. Carlos complied with far more alacrity than Billie would have given him credit for.

"Congratulations," Billie said lightly. "I see you've trained your lap dog well." She shot a glance at Carlos. His eyes darkened in resentment.

"She thinks I sent Charlie Sweet and his men after her," he said, brushing absently at his behind then hooking a thumb in the front of his leather trousers, letting his fingers splay downward across his bulge. The pose was cocky and well rehearsed. His silk shirt was unbuttoned nearly to his waist so she could see his tanned, unblemished chest, thin but well muscled. His body looked like a dancer's, his expression automatically simulated passion.

"Tell her I didn't do it," he said to Helen although his gaze remained on Billie.

"Didn't you, darling?" Helen asked, chuckling with some perverted humor of her own. Startled, Carlos turned to look at her.

"You know I didn't," he said, his sexy pose forgotten. Now he was an injured manchild.

"Don't be tiresome," Helen said dismissively. "Can't you see your little friend is in need of a drink and," she paused, her gaze sliding sideways toward the dazzling interior of the condo, "other refreshments?"

"No, thanks," Billie said. "I'll just take the money Carlos stole from me and be on my way."

"Oh Billie, you're being so ungracious again. That's not the way to handle this, to come barging into my home and accuse my dear friend, Carlos, of stealing." She actually tsked making Billie want to sock her. Helen had the upper hand and she knew it. She was a big, fat cat playing with a desperate little mouse.

"All right," Billie said. "I could use a drink and food." The last jumped out of her mouth before she could stop it. The half sandwich she'd shared with Dare was all she was running on and her stomach was sending out painful reminders.

"Oh, did you hear that, Carlos? Poor Billie is hungry," Helen cooed. Dramatically, she thrust out a silk-draped arm. "Do come inside, my dear. We'll see to all your needs, won't we, Carlos?"

Billie felt a shiver run up her spine. She felt like a bug who was stupidly about to fly into a spider's web. She could extricate herself. There was no reason to fear this woman and as for Carlos, she cast him a derisive glance that told volumes about her respect for him.

The living room was as big as a ballroom and as dazzling as the chandelier that had caught Billie's attention earlier. Beneath its brilliant light, stainless steel, glass and black leather set an ostentatious Art Deco tone with sofas that came from a place far and away above the common showrooms of Art Van. Figurines graced glass display cabinets. On a glass, marble and gold table that probably cost more than Billie's whole building rested a Chinese lacquered tray with a dozen lines of white powder. Cocaine. Talk about your disproportionate consumption. Helen had her wealth spread out around her like a child with too many toys and a nasty disposition. Bringing a cut-glass decanter and a crystal goblet, she brushed against Billie and wrinkled her nose.

"Oh, my dear, whatever has happened to you? You have a slight, shall we say, odor?" She smiled. There was no sympathy and no friendliness in the grimace. Rather, she looked more like an alligator with a bad dye job.

"Well, I'm having trouble getting to my shower since someone shot up my place," Billie said, staring her down. Helen's eyelids fluttered and her smile reflected secrets – nasty secrets – and spite. Billie turned her attention back to Carlos.

"I could have forgiven you for taking my money," she said coldly. "I almost expected it of you, but I never thought you'd sell me out to Sweet, not after they tried to kill me."

"No, no, Lucy, I promise you. I did not talk to Charlie Sweet. Such men are not the kind of men I like to deal with." He shrugged, his common answer to everything and Billie thought briefly that by the time he reached forty, he'd have a permanently dislocated shoulder, a paunch and bad feet. The thought made her smile.

"Ah, Lucy, you are not angry with me," he crowed in obvious relief. "You believe me."

"Of course, she does, Carlos," Helen said. She filled the glass and held it out to Billie. The liquor shimmered in the brilliant light. Billie's mouth watered.

"Drink this and then take a shower, dear," her hostess said. "It will make you feel so much better, then we'll see about retrieving your money." She cast a dark glance at Carlos who flashed his teeth and postured.

### Dirty Little Secrets

Billie wanted to refuse. She wanted to throw the drink in Helen's face, but suddenly, she was tired of fighting. She took the drink and sipped. It burned a path down to that hole in her stomach and brought a temporary warmth. She shivered.

"Ah, you're tired and chilled. A hot bath," Helen said, suddenly playing the role of a considerate hostess. Billie didn't trust either of them. Helen, even less, but the seductive thought of scented soap and hot water sliding over her skin made her draw in her breath and nod.

"Wonderful," Helen cried with glee, like a greedy child given yet another toy and motioned to a maid who had silently appeared. "Maria, *por favor*, take our visitor to the guest bedroom and see she has fresh towels and a robe." Helen poured another glass of liquor and handed it to Billie, her smile secretive and pleased.

*"Si, Señora."* Maria nodded and led the way down a long hallway lined with paintings that belonged in a museum. The maid showed her the bathroom, left a stack of fluffy towels, each of which probably cost ten times as much as an ordinary family's dinner out at the local drive-through.

The shower didn't just flow from a single overhead faucet. Several bars ran up and down the shower wall so you got a head to toe dousing. Billie shut off her anger and stepped under the hot, needlelike spray, letting it rain against her sore body until she groaned with pleasure. This was better than the best climax. Well, nearly.

Finally, when her hair and body were soaked, she picked up the new bar of molded soap and sniffed, it was scented and French, of course, then set about soaping herself down. When she was finished, she pulled her boneless body out of the shower, dried off with one of the thick towels and wrapped herself in a silk robe that had been provided, then returned to the guest room.

Her clothes were gone, whisked away like some offensive offal from the trash can. Billie would have been furious but the bed looked so inviting and though she perched just on the foot, she could tell it was incredibly soft. The maid had turned back the covers and fluffed the pillows. Then she spied the snifter of brandy left on the night table. All the comforts of home, she thought derisively and picked up the glass, swirling the amber liquor in the bell-shaped snifter so it could warm from the heat of her hand. Even that motion soothed her and she thought longingly of the comfort of the bed.

She sat on the side of it and sipped her brandy. It made her feel warm and loved, by whom, she wasn't certain, but it was a feeling she was enjoying. Before she knew it the brandy was gone and her head was reeling pleasantly. With a grunt of contentment she lay back against the pillows and closed her eyes.

Lights, warmly golden and fuzzy-edged, danced behind her lids. She blinked and was surprised to find her eyes were open and the golden, fuzzy light was still there. Dark shadows flickered and drew closer to her, taking shape like some sci-fi writer's idea of an alien being before fleshing into men and women.

"Carlos," she said, her voice coming in a whisper.

"*Si*, Lucy, it is your Carlos." His hands stroked her body through the thin silk and then his long, cool fingers drifted over her nude body. She turned her head trying to peer through the amber halo of light. Her heart pounded in her ears and it took a great effort to hold her lids open. Another figure appeared behind Carlos, another man who also stroked her body. The man had dark hair and she thought it might be Dare.

"Mmm, that's nice," she told him and raised her arms, but he disappeared and a pale mask topped with orange-red hair appeared over Carlos' shoulder. The mask opened its carmine-lined mouth and laughed loudly, revealing large teeth that made her feel afraid. She turned her head away and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the figures were gone, but she heard sounds and raised her head and gazed around blearily. The figures had moved to the chaise lounge on one end of the bedroom. The mask with red hair had been Helen, she realized, and Helen was now getting her brains screwed out by two men, one of whom appeared to be Dare.

"Dare!" Billie cried out, reaching for him. All three of them looked at her and laughed, which made Billie weep. Tears flowed down her cheek onto the silk bedding. Dimly, she perceived she'd been drugged. She drew her legs up and rolled into a ball facing them, watching.

They made a sandwich, Billie thought weepily and began to laugh at her own wit, then she remembered she hadn't eaten any food. Her stomach growled which only made her laugh more. Dare turned to look at her and she thought he said she was next. Helen growled at him, so he turned his attention back to her.

"Open your eyes and watch, Billie," someone said in a hard, breathless voice. Billie opened her eyes and saw the mask was back, the mask that was really Helen Savage.

"The Savage Mask," she babbled and laughed wildly.

Helen took hold of Billie's shoulder and pulled her onto her back.

"No," Billie said, trying to roll away, but Helen held her firm, her long nails raking across Billie's skin. "Dare, help me," she cried reaching toward the chaise lounge where the two men lay.

Helen laughed. "Dare can't help you now. No one can."

"Dare can. He's a cop and he's very good. He'll take care of me and you'll be sorry if you do anything to me."

"Oh, no, Billie, there's no getting out of it now. You're mine for the night."

"No, I don't want to," Billie cried and the sound came out like a frightened child. She wasn't a child though, she'd never been a child. She'd been grown up from the moment Mama left her at the Children's Home and she knew how to take care of herself. She pushed against the disembodied mask that was Helen.

"Leave me alone," she said rolling her head to one side to see if there was any help for her.

She felt Helen's hands on her again and feebly flailed her arms to brush them away. Helen laughed.

#### Dirty Little Secrets

"Don't," Billie shouted, but even to her own ears it came out as little more than a whimper. She pushed against Helen's head, her fingers tangling in the fiery red curls and she yanked as hard as she could.

"Ouch, you bitch," Helen cried pulling back. Drawing back a hand she slapped Billie, hard, across the face. "You asked for this, you snooty little bitch, so you're going to get what's coming to you. No one rejects Helen Savage. I get what I want the way I want it, have you got that?" She leaned over Billie menacingly. When she made no answer, the older woman smiled.

"That's better. Don't fight me on this, my dear, it will go much easier for you, because trust me, if you want it rough, I like it that way too." Her smeared lipsticked mouth looked grotesque as she lowered her head.

After Helen's slap, Billie had commanded herself to return the favor but her drugged state slowed her response time, so it took all of a half a minute for the message to get to her hand. By the time she'd balled it into a fist and swung, Helen's head was on its descent toward her chest. Billie pulled up every ounce of determination she still possessed and rounded her blow, aiming right at Helen's face. The resultant scream and the pain in her knuckles let her know she'd succeeded.

"When I say no, I mean no," she gasped and wasn't sure anyone heard her before a dark wave rolled toward her. Vaguely, she heard people talking.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Carlos said rushing to Helen's side. Helen hovered on the foot of the bed, her hand cupped to her bleeding nose.

"The bitch broke my nose," Helen wailed. Good thing she had such a good surgeon Billie thought and smiled as the wave of blackness struck her.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she woke again, she was lying on a cold marble floor while agonizing chills racked her nude body. Slowly, she raised her head, moaning against the flood of pain behind her eyes and assessed her surroundings. She was back in the marble and glass bathroom with no clothes whatsoever. She shook with cold. She had to get out of here.

Struggling to her feet, she staggered to the door and tried the knob. Locked. Shivering uncontrollably, she looked around for something to put on to warm herself. There was nothing except the deep-piled terry cloth towels. Grabbing a couple, she wrapped one around her shoulders and the other around her torso then paced back and forth across the marble floor while she considered what she could do to get herself out of here. No telling what that sick, psycho bitch would do to her.

She shivered in her towel and turned. Her gaze fell on the shower and she whipped off the towel and stepped inside, turning the water to the hottest temperature she could stand. After ten minutes she was warm so she turned off the water and crouched in the steaming warmth left behind.

She wasn't sure how long she waited. She thought of everything that had happened since she stepped out of Helen's glass and marble elevator. She'd walked into a worse trap than the one at Charlie Sweet's place. She'd underestimated its danger because of its rich setting. Crouched there she thought of the scenes that had taken place in the bedroom. Obviously the man who'd been with Carlos and Helen was not Dare. The drugs had made her hallucinate, but all the rest of it was real enough. She remembered the satisfaction of her fist connecting with Helen's nose and the shriek that followed.

The shower stall grew cold again and she turned on the hot water, letting it warm her as it had before, then more waiting. She thought she might have dozed off for a time, because she jerked upright, startled at the sound of the door opening. Beyond the shower glass a nude, dark-haired man stumbled in and hurried to the toilet where he sighed with contentment as he relieved himself. Carlos.

"Carlos!" she cried, hurrying out of the shower and grabbing a towel to wrap around herself to stay warm. She didn't ever want to be that cold again.

Startled at her sudden appearance, Carlos jerked around sending a yellow stream of urine over the marble floor. Billie was certain it steamed when it hit the cold floor.

"What the hell?" he stuttered, correcting his aim. "I forgot you were here, Lucy," he said and shook his penis before facing her. He seemed unconcerned about his nudity and she just plain didn't give a damn.

"Helen is furious with you," he said. "You broke her nose."

"She's lucky that's all I broke," Billie snapped and turned toward the door.

"Don't go out there, Billie. When Helen's mad, she's dangerous." His voice was filled with something she'd never heard there before.

"I'm not afraid of her, Carlos. I'll take her on anytime." She opened the bathroom door and stepped out into the bedroom, looking around cautiously for a red-haired bitch who needed her teeth kicked in. Billie was just the woman to do it. The room was empty except for the man she'd thought was Dare sprawled on the bed, snores emitting from his slack mouth.

"Where is she?" Billie turned on Carlos.

"She's locked herself in her room with some painkillers and a bottle of vodka while she waits for the doctor to come and set her nose."

"What, no cocaine?"

Carlos shrugged and almost smiled. "She cannot sniff cocaine until her nose has been set."

"Ahh. Such a tragedy," Billie said and crossed to the closet. "Where are my clothes?" She threw open the doors and ran a hand along the line of pants and shirts, all men's clothing, all Carlos'.

"She had them thrown away," he said coming to stand near her, his expression morose, his voice soft. "I am sorry you came here, Lucy. If I'd known you would come I would have tried to warn you away, but..." He shrugged.

"I don't give a shit what you're sorry for," Billie said rounding on him. "Just give me back my money."

"I do not have it," he said, the tone of his voice rising in denial. "I invested it in stocks. It is not wise for a man in my position to have a lot of money lying around. If a woman thinks I am in need, she will give me money." Billie looked at him with disgust.

"You do not understand, Billie. You are smart. You can do things I could never do, but me? I have only my looks and one day they will be gone and when women no longer desire me, what am I to do? So I plan for that day. I will use my investment to buy a store in a Mexican town and I will marry a nice girl and have children and I'll have money to give them a good life as well as myself. I will be looked up to in my community."

Listening to his words, Billie could almost forgive him, although she was annoyed at the same time. These were things about Carlos she'd never known and didn't want to now. She was angry beyond words for all the misery and betrayal.

"Maybe you're smarter than you look," she said reluctantly, then glared at him again. "But tell me, why did you have to give me away to Charlie Sweet?"

"I did not do this to you, Billie, honest. I tell Helen about the key and how careful you were with your steel doors and everything, but I did not go to this man with such information. It was Helen. She laughed and said paybacks were hell." He shrugged again. "I'm sorry." For a moment, he looked genuine. His good looks were dimmed and she saw him as the scared, worthless human being he had always been.

"You aren't worth jack shit," she muttered at him, "but you'd be a hell of a lot better off if you got away from Helen Savage's grasp."

"Yes, you are right." He nodded in agreement. "I have already determined this is true. I will leave soon, but first..." He left the rest unfinished and she guessed he meant to gather as much money from his benefactress as he could.

"I need some clothes." Billie burrowed through the closet and finally pulled out a pair of leather pants much like the ones Carlos had worn when he met her the night before except these were a deep, rich shade of purple.

"Lucy, those are my -" He looked at her face and fell silent.

She slid into the pants and fastened them at the waist, reflecting that he was not that much larger than she was, then she grabbed a black silk, ruffled shirt. Scrounging among his shoes, she found a pair of black boots and socks and drew them on. The boots were way too big, but she could walk in them. With a final glare at him, she headed for the bedroom door.

"Lucy, be careful," he cautioned and she rounded on him.

"You can hide in here like a scared jackrabbit," she said, "but I'm getting out of here. Give me what money you have."

"I do not have any money, Lucy." He shrugged. God spare her from men who shrugged. She'd shoot the next one who crossed her path. She flung open the door and

stalked down the hallway. The place was like a mausoleum with all its marble, stainless steel and glass. Beyond the huge floor to ceiling windows, the city spread out like a harlot, with all its ugly, warty places showing and all its urban beauty. A heavy snow had begun to fall, fat flakes hitting the windows and melting in silvery runnels down the glass.

It would be cold out there, she thought and opened a closet door. There were men's jackets and long woolen overcoats, Carlos' she supposed, and next to that a full-length blue mink coat. Billie chose that and flipped it over her shoulders. Its warmth enveloped her like a caress. Glancing down the hall toward the bedroom, she gave a little wave to the dark shadow that stood there watching her. Suddenly, she felt incredibly sorry for Carlos.

"Get out now, while you can," she advised and turned away.

On her way out of the condo, she picked up a vase that looked old and worth a few bucks if pawned. At least it would give her some maneuvering room. Taking a last look back, she wished she had one more grenade then shook her head. No, it was best this way. Like Dare said, she had to stop blowing things up.

# **Chapter Seven**

He was getting tired of waking up to find Billie gone without a word. Even if she did have great tits and a sweet ass and was the best fuck he'd ever had in his life, he felt he deserved better than that from her. This whole thing made his head pound, then he realized the pounding was happening on his front door. Groggy and pissed off, he walked through the morning gloom of the apartment and halted with his hand on the doorknob to peer through the peephole at three men, two in plain clothes, the other, a young cop in uniform. Officer Howard. Obviously, the two plainclothes men were detectives although Dare couldn't see one of them who hung back in the shadows.

"Police, Stefanos. Open up." The older detective with the bulldog expression raised a large fist and pounded again. Dare grimaced. With his head against the door, the sound reverberated painfully in his skull. For damn sure, they weren't going away.

Dare opened the door. "Hey, guys, come on in. You'll have to excuse my attire, I wasn't expecting company at this hour." He held his hands out and looked down at his mallard print boxer shorts, a gift from his mother the past Christmas.

"Don't be cute, Stefanos. We don't care diddly-squat what you're *not* wearing. We're here for the woman." Phil Merkel stepped forward out of the shadows.

"Hey, Merk," Dare greeted him, wondering how long his innocent pose would work.

"The woman," Merkel growled.

"What woman?" If he couldn't look innocent maybe he could pull off dumb.

"You know god damn well what woman," Merkel snarled.

Dare cocked his head as if considering. "No, no, I don't believe I do. There are a lot of women in my life, Merk. You'll have to tell me which one."

Phil's neck swelled and his face turned red. "Cut the crap, Stefanos. We know Billie was in this neighborhood. One of our men saw her."

"There are a lot of people in this neighborhood," he said, crossing his arms over his bare chest and meeting Phil's glare with a cocky expression. "But they don't come to my apartment." He paused and looked at the other detective then back at Merkel.

"You don't have my place staked out, do you, Phil?" he asked lightly. A smile was on his face, but his gaze had turned dark and hard.

"What *d'you* think?" Phil snapped, placing his nose about two inches from Dare's. "Get some clothes on, Stefanos. We're taking you downtown. The chief wants to talk to you."

"At this hour of night? Be reasonable, Merk."

"If you looked out your window, you'd see the sun's up. Quit stalling."

"Hey," Dare said, glaring at the other detective who wandered around the apartment peering into cabinets and closets. "What's he doing? Does he have a search warrant?"

"He's just looking," Merk said. "He's interested in going into real estate after he retires."

"Well, tell him to just look, don't touch, otherwise it'll be called unlawful search and seizure and won't stand up in court."

"What are you afraid we'll find?"

"My dirty laundry," Dare answered and headed down the hall to the bedroom. Merk quickly followed, pausing to glance into the bathroom as he passed.

"I want you to know you're the first man I've ever had in my bedroom," Dare said coyly while he pulled on his pants. "If I'd known you were coming I'd have straightened up a little."

"Gee, I'm touched." Phil was staring at the unmade bed. Both pillows showed the outline of someone's head. "You have a lady friend visiting tonight?"

"You know how it is with us single guys, a different girl every night." Dare shrugged and zipped up his pants. Phil leaned over the bed and picked up one of the pillows.

"Blonde?" he asked holding it out for Dare to see.

"Yeah, they're my weakness." Dare shoved his feet into his shoes and grabbed up the same shirt he'd worn the day before.

"You know she got burned out last night." Merk watched him closely. Dare went still.

"Burned out? Who?"

"Yeah, that building of hers over on Washington. Someone went in and doused it down with kerosene then lit a match."

Dare's heart drummed in his ears. "Did they find any bodies? Was Billie there when it burned?"

Merk shook his head. "Don't play dumb with me, Dare. I know she was near your place just before the building went up. For all we know she did it herself for the insurance." He paused measuring Dare's reaction. When there was none, he went on.

"Nah, there weren't any bodies, not even your girlfriend, which is a miracle in and of itself. You know how the homeless bums are in this town. They find a warm, vacant place and the word spreads. A bunch of 'em were nesting in the building, the last I heard, but somebody must've warned 'em ahead of time and they all got out."

"Lucky for them," Dare replied. "Well hey, I can't say this hasn't been fun, but I'm ready to go now." He took a step toward the hall, his expression expectant. He could still hear the bulldog bumping around in his living room. Merkel regarded him with obsidian eyes then tossed the pillow back on the bed.

Blinking at the bright glare of urban sunlight, Dare followed the two detectives out to the car.

"Hey, I didn't get your name," he said to bulldog who merely grunted and put a hand over Dare's head to push him into the back seat of the squad car just like he was a real criminal.

"Oh, well, thanks," Dare said and leaned out of the car to call to the uniformed cop. "Nice to see you again, Howie."

The young officer had been present during the whole interchange but hadn't spoken one word. Now he turned before getting into his new cruiser. It wasn't exactly new, in fact, it was probably the oldest unit the department possessed. Obviously, they were making a point with him. Nevertheless, Howie raised a hand in salute then quickly lowered it as if caught doing something totally inappropriate. Dare smiled. The kid was coming along pretty good.

They drove to the station in silence. Dare figured they'd bring out the rubber hose and water torture once they got him downtown. He leaned back in the seat and thought about things. They were going after Billie pretty hard, and they didn't trust him to deliver her. He guessed this was going to be a long morning.

And it was.

They didn't have any new questions to ask and he didn't offer any new answers. He had to explain about the Porsche and there were some threats he'd have to pay for it out of his salary, which, they explained in case he hadn't done the math, was going to take him most of the rest of his miserable life to pay off. Dare didn't say much. He knew it was a bluff. The department had insurance to cover this kind of thing for a cop doing his job, and he'd been trying to bring in a person of interest wanted for questioning.

The fact that he hadn't delivered said person of interest was immaterial. The fact that Officer Howard had been there at the time Billie made her getaway helped. They weren't happy about it, but in the end they had to let him go.

He wandered over to Bunco, figuring he'd better put in an appearance to keep Pete happy. He'd forgotten that was an impossibility. Pete was never happy and right now Dare was high on his list as the reason why. Still, to appease him, Dare spent a couple of hours clearing up some paperwork on past cases and making calls on new complaints. By lunchtime, he felt pretty sure he'd done his duty and headed out.

"I want to see you back in here this afternoon," Pete said, as he walked by.

"Yeah, sure, Pete," he answered with a sober, innocent expression.

"And don't go messing around in Homicide again," the red-faced Irishman roared. "You're not in Homicide anymore. You work Bunco. Got it?"

"I do now," Dare said and kept moving. A moving target was harder to hit. He stopped at a Coney Island restaurant and grabbed a chili dog then set out searching for Billie. Where the hell was she now? He hadn't a clue where to look. It was for damn sure she wasn't back at her building. For some reason though, he felt compelled to have a look.

The gutted building was obviously a total loss, the first- and second-floor windows blown out and the roof collapsed. Only the smoke-blackened walls remained. He remembered her assertion that she owned the building free and clear and its worth, then wondered if she had insurance. He felt bad for her.

He headed down to Elizabeth Street and rousted out some of his contacts, but even they hadn't seen or heard from her since she blew up the Dizzy Goose.

"Hey, man, you're looking for a dead woman," Patti said. "She just don't know she's dead yet. You mess with Charlie Sweet and you ain't got no way out."

"Yeah, well, thanks, Patti. In the meantime, if you hear anything, get word to me. I'll be working the neighborhood for a few hours." He peeled off a twenty and held it out. "There's more if you find her."

"I'll see what I can do." The bill disappeared down her ample cleavage so quickly Dare had to blink.

"You be careful, now, you hear?" Patti sashayed away. Watching her go in her platform heels and skimpy skirt and top which had obviously seen better days, he was glad he'd given her the twenty even if she used it to buy a few hours of forgetfulness in a bottle of gin or a nugget of crack. Now and then, everyone needed a few moments of oblivion.

It was nearly midnight when he dragged himself back to his apartment. He wasn't sure why he'd come back. He wouldn't be able to sleep, but he'd done all he could on the street. He'd left his number with a couple of his contacts who'd promised to call if they heard anything. He wasn't holding his breath.

He climbed the stairs to his abode, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up in warning. Surreptitiously, he glanced around. One of the hall lights was out. It'd been burning that morning when he left. He waited, barely breathing. Someone else was waiting too. Someone who was a little too impatient, who couldn't help himself from moving so the brush of his jacket against the wallpaper made a sound.

Dare pulled his pistol, eased himself against his doorjamb and carefully inserted his key. Inside the phone began to ring. Dare flipped the key and the door flew open. He jumped inside as two bullets hit where his head had been. Whirling, he tried to slam the door closed but a big man was there, his foot and shoulder blocking the door. Dare drew it back and slammed it against him with all his might. The man simply grunted and pushed himself inside, one large meaty hand going for Dare's throat.

Dare stumbled backward and his gun flew from his hand, sliding away in the darkened living room. The two men struggled against each other and Dare knew this was a fight he could lose. The man outweighed him by a good fifty pounds and obviously had some experience with street fighting. Of course, he did too, Dare reminded himself, trying to draw a breath beneath the man's stranglehold. Bunching every ounce of strength he possessed he turned sharply, slamming the man into the wall.

#### Dirty Little Secrets

The maneuver loosened his hold, but the assailant came after him again. Dare caught the gleam of light against a gun barrel and ducked and rolled just as the weapon fired. He ended up in the middle of his living room floor with his lost gun right beneath him. Giving a fervent thank-you to a God who'd taken pity on him, he rolled again, taking the gun with him then brought it up and shot. The assailant grunted and fell to the floor like a stone.

Breathing hard, Dare got to his feet and rushed to the door, stuck his head out just far enough to peer down the hall, then seeing no one, he slammed the door and locked it. Only then did he turn on the light and look at the man who'd tried to murder him. With his bulk and his bald head, he looked vaguely familiar and Dare guessed he was one of the gunmen who'd chased them through Cobo Hall the day before. So, Sweet knew about him. The question was how? Had Billie given them his name before she died? Was she still alive, but they'd tortured it out of her? His chest tightened at the thought. Hell, maybe they didn't even have to torture her. She didn't owe him anything. He rifled through the dead guy's pockets for identification.

The phone started ringing again. At first, he ignored it, but its shrill insistency finally broke through his preoccupation. Like a man just awakening, he answered.

"Dare, this is Faber. I got something for you about the dame."

"What?" His heart pounded in his chest.

"She's at the Greektown Casino. She's running a good streak, but I heard some of them ain't too happy with her down there."

"Thanks, Faber, I owe you big-time. I'll bring some money to you when I get down there." He hung up and looked around his apartment. They'd pretty much wrecked the living room, thrashing around the way they had. He couldn't bring Billie back here, no matter what. Sweet would just send more men.

Hurrying now, he grabbed a bag and threw in some clean underwear, extra ammunition and a third gun he'd picked up when he worked Homicide. Was that everything? Hell, yes, when you had a hoodlum and his men out to kill you, taking time for clean underwear was insane. At the door, he looked back at the dead man in the middle of his living room, then turned out the light and closed the door. People were standing in the hallway, looking mystified and afraid.

"Did you hear those gunshots?" they demanded of him.

"Nah, probably just a television show."

In the distance he could hear police sirens and slipped away, taking the back entrance to avoid the cops.

\* \* \* \* \*

She'd gotten fifty bucks for the vase, a lot less than it was worth and a lot more than the pawn shop owner wanted to pay, but she'd stuck to her guns and he'd finally agreed, grudgingly handing her a fifty dollar bill and reaching for the vase with greedy

hands. Back on the streets, she'd hiked down to Greektown in Carlos' ill-fitting, heelrubbing boots and hit the casino. She'd played the quarter slots first and with luck built up her cash a little, then moved to the dollar machines where she got even luckier, taking sixteen hundred dollars. Security was circling her like hawks over roadkill when she walked over to the blackjack tables and settled on a stool.

She moved often, going from the slots, back to the tables and back to the slots again and all the while she was tailed by security. They'd pegged her for a card counter or worse. She had a couple of thousand now, but she was looking for one more big score. She considered the roulette wheels, but figured they were too easy to rig and finally settled at a poker table. Her stakes were a little thin for this game, but with any luck, she could change that.

By midnight, she'd been playing for hours. She had ten thousand and that would give her cushion enough to move around, rent a car, get out of town, whatever she had to do. She was just about to tell them to deal her out when she sensed a presence at her elbow. Expecting to see a security guard, she looked up with annoyance. Carlos stood behind her looking like the stud he was in black leather from head to toe. She'd hate to smell his body when he came out of all that leather.

"Fancy meeting you here," she said.

"I have a message." He didn't meet her eyes.

"From Helen?"

"Fred Boyd." Carlos glanced over his shoulder nervously.

"Never heard of him," she lied. He'd been one of the gunmen in Sweet's office.

"He's heard of you," Carlos said. "He wants you to meet in the back alley of the Waterfront. It's a jazz joint down on -"

"I know it. What does he want to see me about?"

Carlos shrugged, stiffly, like his shoulders and hips had been frozen for a time, but now were thawing out. "He said he thinks he can square you with Sweet."

"Oh, yeah, and why would he do something like that for me?"

"Play or give up your seat," the dealer said and Billie gathered up her chips. Carlos watched avidly.

"His help'll cost you," he said, licking his lips.

"I'll just bet," she answered and carried her winnings to the windows. Carlos followed, looking desperate now.

"Look, Lucy, I told him I'd get you to come talk to him."

"Why doesn't he come here where there are lights and people?" she challenged.

"Oh, I see, you do not trust me, Lucy," Carlos said sadly.

She turned on him, clenching her fist to keep from cold-cocking him. "Why should I trust you? You're for hire to the one with the largest bankroll." She grasped his leather shirtfront.

"Not against you, Lucy. I owe you." He looked chastised and hurt. "I have taken money from you when you were generous to me, but I am an honorable man."

Billie looked at him in amazement then thought maybe in his mindset he was right. He had his own code of ethics, just as she had hers and Latin males were strangely bound by their code of honor.

"Okay." She shrugged then grinned at her gesture. It was contagious. "I'll go." She tucked her winnings into the deep pockets of Helen's mink coat. Together they made their way outside and headed down the wet, windswept street toward Congress. Two blocks and they turned down a side street to a combination restaurant and jazz bar. Despite the late hour, the place was filled and just getting its second wind with hot jazz bleeding out onto the sidewalk.

"I'm not going in," Carlos said, pulling back into the shadows. Immediately, Billie's radar went up.

"Why not?" she demanded, blocking him from a getaway.

"I don't want to be associated with any of Sweet's men. It would ruin me in this town if word got out that I was working for a hoodlum like him."

"Being a gigolo is a cut above, huh?" Billie asked.

Carlos grimaced. "Make fun of me, if you want, Lucy, but I have my code of – "

"Code of honor, I know," Billie said. "If this works out, then I'll owe you."

"If this works out then I will have evened the score for the way I left you," Carlos said softly. In the dim light of the streetlamp, his eyes were dark and sad looking.

"Thanks," she said and turned toward the entrance.

The Waterfront had once been a stop-off place for people traveling the river, with the public room and bar downstairs and rooms for the night or hour just two rickety flights of stairs up. Now, the downstairs was a restaurant and the floors above used for jazz concerts, gambling and anything else the present owners opted for as a means to make big money.

Billie circled the tables to the bar and took a seat near the wall while she looked around. The place was packed and above the raucous laughter and conversation, a saxophone's wail trickled down from the floors above adding to the noise level. She didn't see anyone who looked like he worked for a big-time gangster. The gathering was mostly young professional couples, in from the suburbs to have a big, bad old night out on the town. She ordered a drink and sipped it while she waited in vain. When the bartender worked his way down to her again, she asked him about a man named Boyd.

"Oh, yeah, he's waitin' out back for you," he said, nodding toward a back entrance. Billie studied the room, looking for a trap, but everyone seemed intent on their own good time. She threw her drink back and slid off the stool and made her way to the back door.

Outside, the night was dark and cold, the temperature seeming to have dipped just since she'd first arrived. Bunching the lapels of Helen's fur coat around her, she took a

few steps deeper into the alley. She didn't like this one bit. She paused, alert, her body tense, turning her head as she listened for any sound of someone's presence in the alley. She was about to let her guard down when she sensed someone fly through the air and plow into her. She twisted away, but not soon enough. The weight bore her down to the cobblestone alleyway. A hard barrel pressed against her temple.

"Give me your money," a voice growled. So, that's what this was about. A setup for a robbery. She'd personally kill Carlos for this final betrayal, but her captor wasn't patient while she sorted everything out. He jammed the gun barrel harder against the side of her head.

"You heard me, give me your money."

"I-I don't have any," she stuttered. "I... My husband has all my money. I don't even have a purse." She tried to sound helpless and innocent like one of those young suburbanites in the bar.

"You got it," the man said leaning against the gun so it dug into her temple. "I just saw you cash in down at the casino. Give it to me."

"O-okay. Are you Boyd?" she asked.

"You don't need to know that."

"Okay, okay. But you'll have to get off me. I can't reach it like this."

He slid off and got to his feet, his gun leveled at her.

"Don't try no funny stuff," he warned.

"No, no, I won't." She sat up and faced him. It was Boyd. She delved into her coat pockets for the wads of cash she'd just won. She handed it over and watched silently as he quickly crammed it into his own pockets, then leveled the gun at her head.

"What? I gave you my money. That's all I have," she protested.

"I got a present for you," the man said, smiling. "It's from Charlie Sweet. He don't like what you did to Sam Udall." His knuckles whitened as his grip tightened.

Billie looked down the bore of the gun and knew these were her last moments on earth. Funny that her last thoughts should be about a cop with a crooked grin and a scar across one cheek.

# **Chapter Eight**

Billie squeezed her eyes shut, unwilling to admit she was too much of a coward to face death head-on, but damn, she didn't want to die this way. There were too many things in her life she wanted to see to the end. Dare Stefanos was one of them. She bit her lip. At least she'd go without whimpering, she resolved.

Suddenly, the back door flew open, slapping against the side of the building so she was startled into opening her eyes. Boyd turned, his gun raised, his mouth gaping in surprise just as a body plowed into him. One hand grasped Boyd's gun hand and pounded it against the brick wall so the weapon went flying away and buried itself inside a dumpster. Two men grappled, one drew back a fist and landed a blow against the other. For one moment, the streetlight shone on a familiar face.

"Dare," Billie cried, her voice cracking with joy and relief.

He turned to her and in that instant, Boyd leaped to his feet and fled down the alley.

"Are you okay?" At her nod, he gave chase but was soon back.

"He got away." He sank down beside her, out of breath, dirty and bleeding.

"What are you doing here?" she asked thinking she'd never been so glad to see a man.

"At the risk of sounding redundant, saving your ass, again."

"Are you hurt?" She chose to ignore his sarcastic reply.

He shook his head.

"Oh Dare, he took my money," she cried, looking toward the end of the alley. "Get up and look for him."

"What money?"

"The money I won gambling," she said. "Over ten thousand dollars."

"*You* won ten thousand dollars?" He gaped at her then put his arms around her, his forehead touching hers. "Princess, I'm never letting a talented dame like you get away again."

"Now is not the time for joking," Billie snapped. "I need that money to get away from Detroit, and Boyd just stole it."

"Boyd?" Dare's whole demeanor changed, grew harder, darker. His body was tense, his gaze feral and alert. "Who the hell are you talking about?"

"One of Charlie Sweet's wiseguys," Billie said in exasperation. "Go after him, Dare. You're a cop and that bastard just stole my money plus he meant to kill-"

She couldn't finish because he grabbed her arms, shaking her slightly to shut down her tirade.

"How do you know he was Boyd and that he worked for Sweet?" he demanded.

"Ow, you're hurting me." She twisted against him.

"I'm sorry," he said with clenched teeth. "But I need to know, now!" He shook her again, and Billie was getting pissed off. "And I need my money back, now. What the hell are you doing?" she demanded, surprised and further irate at his sudden show of superior strength. This wasn't what she'd come to expect from Dare.

"I'm trying to capture the son of a bitch who screwed up my life," he shouted back.

She was glad she wasn't a criminal he was after because he was glaring at her as if he could rip her head off her shoulders. She tossed her hair just to show she wasn't scared.

"Answer my question," he growled, low in his throat.

Okay, so she was a little bit scared. "He was at the Dizzy Goose when I went there to see Charlie Sweet and that's what Sweet called him."

"You're sure?" He'd loosened his grip on her, but he was still in her face, his strong Greek jaw jutting pugnaciously.

"Of course, I'm sure. What do you think, that I'm blonde or something?" She'd thought he'd grin in that slow, easy way of his, but he didn't. His eyes flashed and he let go of her so suddenly she fell back against the brick wall. He raced to the end of the alley and disappeared down the street.

She leaned against the wall, rubbing her arms and waiting for him to return, and when he didn't, she drew a deep breath and shivering, looked around for Helen's mink coat. She rescued it from the slush and shook it out, swatting at the wetness, then put it on. Its warmth enveloped her. Thoughts of self-preservation pierced her anger and frustration. She had to get out of here before Sweet's men showed up *en force*, then even Dare Stefanos couldn't save her. She glanced at the back door to the restaurant but the bartender had definitely been part of the setup and he'd notify Charlie in a Detroit minute that she was still alive. If he didn't, Carlos would.

She started walking, headed in the same direction Dare had taken. Maybe he'd caught Boyd and was even this minute pounding the holy shit out of him and retrieving her hard-earned money. Maybe, as long as she was wishing for Christmas, just maybe Carlos was there getting pounded a little bit too. Or maybe Boyd had led Dare into a trap and several of Charlie's men were pounding on him.

She started running in Carlos' too-big, shuffling boots, hesitating only when she heard a groan or shout that might be Dare getting beaten up by ten guys, or more. And it would take that many to bring Dare down, she thought. He was a fighter and he wouldn't be outdone by a mere two or three tough guys. He was unbeatable.

Suddenly a shadow wavered in the circle of a street lamp a half block away and she paused, studying the stumbling figure. Was it a homeless man or –

## Dirty Little Secrets

"Dare," she cried and ran toward him, catching him around his waist and struggling to keep him upright as he weaved dangerously. "Are you all right? Did they hurt you? Did you find Boyd? Did you get my money back? Did they hurt you, the bastards?"

"Sh-sh-ut up. Let me – get my breath," he gasped, leaning against her so heavily she had to brace herself not to be pushed down to the sidewalk.

"Oh, Dare, honey," she whispered. "What did they do to you? Those bastards! How many were there? Ten, I bet. They had to use ten to get to you like this. My poor Dare. How bad is it?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't find him," he wheezed and drew himself up as if trying to draw in more air. His arm lay heavily along Billie's shoulders. At his words, she went still.

"*You couldn't find him?*" she asked incredulously. "You mean you didn't fight anyone? No one beat you up?"

He shook his head, breathing a little easier now but still, clearly out of breath. Billie shrugged off the arm on her shoulders.

"You didn't find him? You let him get away?"

He nodded. "Sorry about your money, Princess."

"Sorry?" She glared at him. "If you didn't find him, why the hell are you standing here?" she demanded, wanting to sock him herself.

"Look, there's no way I can find him in the dark, chasing down the street like a crazy man. I was just so pissed off, I wasn't thinking." He looked around and took her elbow in a protective way that made her see red and want to simper at the same time. Dare was not good for her kick-ass persona. He made her want to be a lady, for Christ's sake. She snatched her elbow away and turned her back on him.

"Look, Princess, I'm sorry I couldn't catch Boyd, okay? We just can't go off half cocked here. We'll get ourselves killed. A guy was waiting at my apartment tonight when I got home."

That information made her swing around. "What happened?"

Dare shrugged, not the Latin stud rendition but the all-American male hero who wants to keep something unpleasant from his damsel in distress.

"Maybe he was looking for me?" she suggested.

Dare shook his head. "Nah. The lights were on. We look a lot different in the light. I think he knew it was me."

"What happened?" she repeated, her voice little more than a whisper.

"I killed him. He's still there, sprawled out in my living room like he doesn't have a care in the world. What I want to know is how the hell did he know where I was? Did you tell anybody about me?"

"No." She was emphatic, then she drew in a breath. "I was drugged last night, I'm not sure what I said."

"God-dammit, Billie. How do you get yourself into these things?"

"I went to Helen Savage's penthouse to make Carlos give me back some of the money he stole from me."

"Who is Carlos?"

"He-he was my...boyfriend, except I paid him."

He didn't say a word, just stared at her for a long time.

"So, you were in Helen Savage's penthouse last night?"

"Yes, that's where I knew I would find Carlos. Th-they drugged me. Helen has a thing for me."

Dare held up a hand. "Don't say any more." He cast a quick glance up and down the street. "We can't stand out here in the open. We have to find some place to stay. We can't go back to my apartment."

"And we can't go back to my place. They... Oh, Dare, they burned my building." Her voice caught and she scrubbed at her eyes against the sting of tears. She wasn't a crier, never had been, never would be, but now that she could talk to someone about what had happened, about the homeless, abandoned feeling reawakened in her soul, she felt like bawling her head off.

Dare caught hold of her arms and pulled her against him. "I know, baby. That had to hurt."

"Why'd they have to burn it?"

"To flush you out of your lair, so you'd be on the streets with no place to go. No one's going to give you shelter now that they know Sweet's after you, unless you've got family."

"I grew up in a Children's Home, remember, and I was too busy surviving to make friends. Don't you have someone?"

"Yeah, I've got family, but this is getting ugly. I don't want to go to them except as a last resort." He stood chewing his bottom lip, one large hand absently patting her back. In spite of their danger, she felt safe. It was a strange feeling and one she didn't have to work to achieve. Dare did that just by being there. She'd do her part to reciprocate and cover his back, of course, but just at this moment, she was lost in the feeling that someone cared about her.

Dare snapped his finger. "I know a place we can hide out." He looked around, considering. "My car's parked a couple of blocks away, but I don't want it to turn up anywhere near where we're going."

"Where *are* we going?"

"Sam Udall's place. Come on."

"I can't go back there."

"Why not, Billie?" Dare's eyes narrowed while he waited for an answer."

"That's where he was killed."

"Yep, so it was, and you and I need to talk about that. Right now, we've got to find transportation."

"A cab?"

Dare shook his head. "They can trace us. We'll walk it."

"Are you crazy? We can't walk that far." She stared at the sky. "Besides, it'll be daylight soon and we can't break into the place in broad daylight."

"Good thinking. Okay, we'll take a cab most of the way and have him drop us off a mile or so from Udall's, then we'll walk the rest of the way. You can do that, can't you?"

"Hey, you walk around in a pair of too big, gigolo boots with heels that don't even belong to you and see how far you can hike, buster. Even at that, I'll keep up with you."

He chuckled. You're all right, Princess. You've got a good head on your shoulders and you've got guts."

"You've got a good head. Two, actually," she said and met his gaze. He grinned devilishly, his irrepressible humor back, then he turned and hailed a cab and bowed her toward it. Why was everything so much easier with Dare and so much more fun?

A half hour later she wasn't thinking about fun, but about the Tetons size blister that had come up on her heel.

"Are we there yet?" she muttered, limping along behind him.

"Come on, Princess, don't give out on me yet. We're nearly there."

"You said that a half hour ago."

"Don't be whiny, Billie. It's not becoming."

"Oh, mister, I'm so capable," she muttered. "Wish I had my pistol, I'd shoot you in the ass and then see how far you could walk."

"You're starting to sound vindictive. Also not attractive in a woman."

She remained silent since it took more energy to argue than just to trudge along. She had a real urge to take a running start and plant Carlos' gigolo boot right in Dare's backside, but that also took energy she no longer possessed. The past twenty-four hours had taken their toll on her and she was feeling the down side of Helen's drugs—the bitch. May her nose heal crooked.

"There's Sam's spread right ahead." He stopped so suddenly, she ran right into him. "What are you, drunk? Try to stay on your feet, Princess, we're nearly there."

"I'm not..." She swallowed her words and followed.

"There's no cruiser," he said looking around, "so I'm betting they're no longer guarding the place, just doing a drive-by." He hurried to the gate and tried it. "Locked. We'll have to go over the wall."

"Naturally," Billie grumbled. "Nothing's going to be easy at this point."

"Stop complaining. You've been great up to now. You were able to outrun and outshoot bad guys like you were a real pro."

"I still am a pro," she protested, following him along the spiked fence. "But I'm tired and I'm hungry and I'm fed up with people shooting at me and drugging me and -"

"Pipe down," he ordered and came to a halt behind some bushes. "Look, this fence is going to be hard to scale. I'll have to boost you over and you look in the gatehouse and see if you can find a key to open the gate."

"Why me?" Billie regarded the wrought iron fence with long, smooth rods that gave no foothold. To make matters worse, the decorative tops were capped off with some vicious-looking spikes meant to deter any intruder.

"Because you're littler than me," Dare explained patiently. "Come on, over you go." He cupped his hands and there was nothing for it but to step into them and let him boost her up. Once she grasped the top crossbar, she was able to pull herself up, along with a little help from Dare's broad palm in the middle of her ass.

It wasn't so easy to maneuver herself over the spikes. She did it, but not without catching Carlos' purple leather pants on a spike and scraping a long gash along one thigh. Likewise, Helen's mink coat took a beating as she slid down the other side, the heavy satin lining ripping from shoulder to hem. The thing looked pathetic anyway, she reflected. You'd think for the money Helen must have paid for it that it would have held up better. A thought came to her.

"Dare," she whispered, gripping the spokes. "What if there are guard dogs?"

"He didn't have guard dogs."

"Yes, he did."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"How did you get in there before?"

"I brought steaks laced with enough drugs to knock them out."

"Damn, I'm fresh out of steaks." He stood considering. "The police probably took the dogs off to the pound anyway since there's no one here to feed them. Stop worrying. Just get to the gatehouse and look for a key."

"I hope you're right," she muttered and made her way along the fence and back to the small stone building. Dare followed on his side. "The door's locked," she whispered after turning the knob.

"Then break the glass." His disposition appeared to be going downhill.

Billie looked around for a rock and tapped the small windowpane until the glass shattered and fell inward, then shoved her hand inside and opened the door. No sooner had she entered the small building, than she heard a ferocious growl and something launched itself against the door, slamming it shut behind her.

"Dare," she screamed and stuck her head out the broken window. Two Doberman pinschers leaped up toward her, their nails clawing at the wood, their eyes wild with bloodlust. In the distance headlights flared. "Get down," he snapped. "They can't get to you in there. I've got to hide." He disappeared.

"Dare, damn you, don't you go away and leave me here." The headlights swept across the gate and she ducked down. Outside, the dogs howled and raced along the fence's perimeter. She thought of Dare trapped by the headlights and the dogs. No matter where he tried to hide the barking dogs would give him away. Cautiously, she got to her feet and peered out the corner of the window. The cruiser had stopped and one of the patrolmen had gotten out to shine his flashlight along the fence. Their lights drew the dogs back to the gate where they threw themselves against the wrought iron, snarling and slavering like the hounds of Baskerville.

"What's got them riled up?" the driver called to his partner.

"I don't see anything," the other said. "Besides with these guys, no one's getting in there." He walked back to the cruiser, got in and they drove away. The dogs paced and growled for a while and finally settled down, slowly making their way up the winding drive toward the mansion.

Billie counted to a hundred, waiting for Dare to return, and when he didn't, she counted again and weighed her options. She could spend the night in this cramped space, trying to sleep on the damp cement floor, or she could take some course of action even if it was wrong. She opted for the latter. She was never one to wait for a rescue.

Cautiously, she followed the fence looking for some sign of Dare or his bloody body and on finding neither, pushed down an irrational anger that he might have abandoned her. She dismissed that thought and hiked back to the gatehouse where she searched for a weapon. If Dare hadn't left her, and she felt certain he hadn't, then he was in trouble and she'd have to do something to rescue him. If she was going to brave those dogs, she wanted to even the odds a little. She found parts of a jack and took the long shank with her as she started up the curving driveway.

She'd gone about fifty feet when a figure separated itself from the shadows of the trees and started toward her. She raised her jack and took a stance, waiting for the assault. A jaunty whistle filled the air.

"Hey, Princess, what are you doing with that?" a voice called and she lowered her makeshift weapon.

"Dare, how the hell did you get in?"

"Well, I was trying to find a place to hide from the patrol car and those damn dogs kept following me which I figured was a dead giveaway that someone was out there. Then I came upon a wooden gate in the side yard behind some trees and it was unlocked so I just came on in."

"Didn't the dogs bother you?"

He shrugged and grinned. "By that time, the cops were shining their lights all around and the dogs took off after them."

Billie felt an urge to scream or beat him up, but wisely refrained.

"Well, don't get too cocky," she snapped. "The dogs are still roaming around here somewhere."

"Oh, no, they're back in their pens enjoying an extra ration for their hard work." He grinned. "Maybe we should hurry along. I didn't exactly lock their cages. I figured when they wanted to roam again, they could just push against the door and they're out."

"What? Why didn't you lock them in?"

"Someone will come tomorrow morning to feed them and pen them up. They might become suspicious if they find the dogs locked up all tidy back in their cages."

From behind the garage came a sharp yip.

"It's time to go," he said, grabbing her hand and sprinting up the driveway. As they neared the mansion, he turned toward the front entrance.

"Not that way," she yelled. "Head for the pool on the north side."

"The pool?" He gasped, pumping his legs. "They live on some of the highest priced riverside property in the state and they have to have a pool too?"

"Probably heated," she panted, having reached the gate leading into the pool area. She swung it wide for Dare to enter, then spotted a ball of black and brown fury headed their way.

"Hurry," she screamed and nearly slammed the gate shut on his heels. The dog flung itself at the gate, snarling and yapping so she quickly jerked her hands back from its sharp teeth.

"Well, this is a smart move," Dare snapped, baring his own teeth. "We're trapped in the god damn pool area."

"There's a way in through the pool house," she said and headed toward the low-roofed, multi-windowed building that sat to one side of the pool.

Dare whistled as they opened the paned glass door and entered a large room with summer furniture and a lighted bar. Small but elegant bathrooms opened on either side.

"All the comforts of home," he said looking around.

"This way." Billie walked behind the bar and into a small kitchenette concealed behind it. From there a door opened into the basement of the mansion. Silently, he followed. They could still hear the dogs barking, but the sound no longer carried the fury and distinction it once had. Finally it stopped altogether.

Straining to remember the last time she'd broken into the mansion through this route, Billie moved forward through total blackness. It was all coming back to her now. With more confidence she led him to the stairs and went up.

"I'll bet Sam's guests loved this," Dare observed, right on her heels.

"This wasn't used by the family and guests. There are French doors that lead out to the pool. This was for the servants to deliver refreshments and drinks." The basement door opened directly into a pantry where smells of spices and leeks assailed their senses. Billie's stomach contracted painfully.

"Food." She wasn't aware she'd said it out loud until Dare spoke.

"First, we check things out to make sure no caretaker or maid is around," he said. "We'll split up so it goes faster. If you come across anyone, just run as fast as you can."

Reluctantly, she nodded in agreement and shucked off the mink coat before setting out. Nightlights had been left on in various rooms so their search was made easier. Fifteen minutes later, they met back in the kitchen. Dare got there first and was cracking open a bottle of beer by the light from the opened refrigerator door.

"Nothing?" she asked going directly to peer inside the oversized, stainless steel wonder.

He shook his head and took a long swallow of beer before lowering the bottle to glance at her. "I think we're safe for a while, but let's not turn on any lights and call attention to the fact we're here."

"Makes sense," she agreed, bent over scrounging for food.

"We have to talk," Dare said.

"We have to eat first," she said. Udall had been offed several days ago, but a spiral ham had been left in the fridge along with bricks of gourmet cheese. She set the repast on the island then searched for a knife. Silently, Dare watched as she shaved off enough meat and cheese to feed an army. When she was finished she laid down the knife and glanced at him.

"Have at it," she said and stuffed a piece of ham into her mouth.

"Billie," he said, studying her intently.

"What?" She dove back into the fridge for mustard and something to drink.

"What happened at Helen Savage's place?"

"What – I told you." She put her nose to the top of a milk carton. "That's no good," she said, putting it back. Instead she chose a bottle of sparkling water. "Want one?" she asked holding it up. "Oh, that's right, you have beer."

"Billie, this is important," he said, glaring at her with compressed lips.

"Okay, but so is food. There's got to be some bread here somewhere." She prowled in the cupboards. "Aha!" She held up a loaf of homemade and squeezed its sides. "It's still fresh, sort of." She brought it back to the table.

"I'm famished," she said and started slicing the bread.

"Will you forget the god damn food," Dare ordered. "We've got something a hell of a lot more important to talk about."

"Obviously, you've been eating your three squares a day, or you wouldn't say that." She glanced at him and noting his grim expression, put down the bread knife and waited, dread building in her like sludgy, black water let loose by a failed dam.

"What's happened now?" she asked, her heart plummeting, her appetite gone.

"Helen Savage is dead. She was murdered earlier today at her penthouse and items were taken, one of them a mink coat. Police think it was a robbery gone bad and..." He hesitated.

"Go on, give me the worst of it," she demanded.

"They think you killed her."

"Damn," Billie said and slid down to the tile floor where she drew her knees up and huddled against the sleek wooden cabinets.

"Billie." Dare hurried around the island to kneel beside her. When she didn't answer, he took hold of her shoulders and shook her slightly. "Billie, are you all right?"

Dully, she nodded, her eyes dark and unfocused. Shivering, she raised her stark gaze to his.

"Do *you* believe I killed her?" she asked.

"Billie, I - " he hedged.

"Do you believe I'm a killer? I know I killed a man but it was in self-defense. That's different than just murdering someone, isn't it?" Her hands clutched at his shirt, as if to make him consider the importance of what she asked. He looked into her eyes and saw the misery there, then slowly shook his head.

"No, Billie, you're not a killer."

Something in her eyes brightened and something tight in his chest eased so he could breathe again. He sat on the floor and pulled her close.

"It's time you tell me everything. So far I've believed you were innocent just on intuition, but I need you to tell me everything about Udall and Pepe and Helen."

"Thank you for believing in me," she said softly and laid her head against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her, rocking her slightly and they sat that way, reveling in a moment's respite from the madness and danger they'd endured.

Finally, she pulled away. "This all started when I scammed some money from Sam Udall. I came here to cover my tracks. He was supposed to be at a charity ball, but he came back early. I hid in the closet and heard someone come up. I thought it was Sam, but then he came up later. He was with a woman and they were laughing, making a lot of noise, then things quieted down. Suddenly I heard a shot ring out and everything was silent.

"I heard someone moving around, so I stayed where I was. When I finally came out, I saw that Sam was dead and so was the woman. I fled, but at the bottom of the stairs I ran into Charlie Sweet. He and his men were searching the place. For what, I don't know." She took a deep breath.

"It's looks bad for me, doesn't it?" she asked, meeting his gaze without flinching. He thought she was the bravest, most headstrong woman he'd ever met and she'd want the truth. He couldn't give her anything less. "Yeah, it looks bad right now. What about Helen? They know you were there. Your prints were everywhere in one of the bedrooms and the attached bath and on a couple of glasses. They think you made yourself at home and Helen caught you in the act of burglarizing her penthouse, so you killed her and took some pieces of art plus the fur coat."

"I can see how the police would think that. I was there, but I didn't kill Helen."

"Start from the beginning and tell me everything."

"As I already told you, I went there to demand Carlos give me back at least some of the money he'd stolen from me." She recited her version of what had happened. Dare made her go back over her account again and again, digging out facts she'd failed to mention. Finally, he stopped his interrogation and stared at her, his gaze thoughtful.

"And you're sure Helen was alive when you left?"

"Fairly so. Carlos said she was locked in her bedroom nursing her broken nose waiting for the doctor to arrive." She sat up and grabbed his shirt. "That's it, Dare. Earlier in the evening, when she made a pass at me, I hit her with my fist. Carlos said her personal physician had to come tend to her, so at least one other person outside of Carlos and the other man saw Helen that night and knows she was alive after I left."

"Good thinking, Princess." Dare got to his feet and dragged her up beside him. "Her physician is a reputable witness that she was alive. And you have Carlos and this unnamed man as possible suspects as well. Their fingerprints have to be all over the place as well." He pushed her onto the stool and looked at her. She looked beat.

"We're tired. We can't figure this out tonight. We're grasping at straws. Let's have a bite to eat and get a good night's rest and tackle it in the morning." He motioned toward the food. "Slice up some of that bread, I'm famished."

"Thank god," Billie muttered and turned back to the bread knife. They ate quickly by the light of the refrigerator, then made sure everything was put back the way they'd found it, just in case some of the help came in the morning to check on things. Wearily, they made their way upstairs, mutually avoiding the wing where Sam Udall had died. Instead, they chose a guest room with a shared bath.

"The accommodations are nowhere near as luxurious as Helen's penthouse, but it sure looks good to me," Billie said, peeling off her leather pants and her shirt. "I'm staying in that shower until I'm a prune and every ounce of fatigue and soreness is gone."

Dare gave her a full ten minutes by herself then knocked on the glass door. "Hey, my turn."

She smiled and cracked the glass panel to peer at him. When she caught sight of him standing naked, his hands planted on his hips, his cock jutting boldly, she opened the door wider, her smile all the invitation he needed.

He pulled her to him and kissed her. She bit his lower lip with her teeth, then laved it with her hot tongue. He crushed her to him, but she pushed away just far enough for the hot pebbly tips of her breasts to brush across his chest in an endless tease that left them both breathless. She reached for the soap and lathered her hands then gripped his hard erection, her hands sliding over him rhythmically. The hot water splashed over them, heating their bodies.

She cupped his balls, massaging them until he groaned.

"I feel like I don't have any balls left," he murmured. "There's no room for them with this gigantic erection.

"Are you bragging or complaining?" she asked and knelt to shove his hard penis against her full breasts.

"Holy Christ," Dare swore.

She laughed. "Haven't you ever had a titty fuck before?" Her voice was all breathy so he knew she was as horny as he was. Her skin was incredibly soft against his tip, her nipples jutting boldly against him and the heat and fullness of her breasts encased him in a facsimile of what was to come. Then her mouth, soft, moist and hot closed around him so he gasped for breath and grabbed hold of the showerhead to keep from falling to his knees. She gobbled him, working her mouth against every sensitive inch of his cock until his release came hot and turgid.

"Lady, I owe you, big-time," he said and lifted her to her feet. He claimed her mouth, thrusting his tongue deep, wanting to give the same thundering pleasure she'd given him. His hands gripped her full breasts, squeezing and caressing until she moaned against his mouth. He reached for the faucet and turned off the water, then with hands beneath her armpits, lifted her high, so she wrapped her long legs around his middle. He wasn't sure he could fuck now, but he was damn sure going to try and if he couldn't get it up again right away, he'd pleasure her in other ways until he had her crowing with delight.

He put her on the bed, his head lowering to her crotch, his tongue dipping and stabbing, his thumbs on her clitoris, rubbing in sensuous circular motions that brought her quickly to a near climax. When she came, he lapped up her juices, delighting in the taste of her. He listened to her whimpers and moans and lessened the assault on her, then rose so he could enter her.

She cried out when he plunged into her. Her long legs were spread wide, resting on his shoulders as he thrust time and again. When she screamed and arched her body, he finally let go of his own control and felt a second climax claim him. He gritted his teeth and tensed his muscles to hold the culmination as long as he could until he was overcome and fell to the bed beside her, gasping for tortured breaths.

Only later, when he could breathe easier was he aware that Billie was crying.

"Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

Silently, she nodded and he longed to see her face better, but they'd been careful not to turn on any lights that could shine out the windows and give them away. Only the light from the open bathroom door cast the tiniest bit of illumination they had and in its soft glow, Billie looked beautiful and womanly lying beside him. He gathered her close, cuddling her, breathing in the sweet feminine smells of her.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he whispered.

She turned in his arms until her cheek was resting against his bare chest.

"I'm happy," she whispered. "I've never been happy before."

He went still, thinking of her words.

"Never?"

"I don't think so," she whispered. "I've been satisfied, momentarily content and triumphant over something I've achieved, but never happy." She ran her hands over his back.

"I have something I need to tell you about me and the life I've led."

Dare went still, half dreading what was come. What if she confessed something he couldn't live with? "I'm listening," he said, making his voice noncommittal.

"I'm not proud of everything I've done. I suppose I could have chosen a better path for myself, but at the moment, it seemed right. I won't justify myself, I'll just say, I'm a con artist. I have been ever since I left the Children's Home."

"Why didn't you ever stop?"

"I did, in the daytime. By day, I'm a successful Certified Public Accountant, by night, I cheat wealthy, greedy people out of their money. I always felt like they deserved it. I suppose you could call me a modern day Robin Hood. Or not."

"Billie," he said after a long time. "Do you think you could be Maid Marian instead of Robin Hood?"

"Yeah, I think I could," she answered softly.

He curved his body around hers, trying to mold her to him so they were one. She wasn't the first woman in his life to touch him. There had been his wife and he'd had a hard time getting over her when they divorced, but he'd never felt this intensity of passion for one person. Why did it have to happen with a woman wanted by the cops and the mob and God only knew who else. He'd just opened his heart to a load of heartache, he realized. So be it, he thought. If he'd wanted life to be easy, he wouldn't have been a cop. She was worth whatever it took to keep her safe and in his arms.

## **Chapter Nine**

Barking dogs woke them. Dare sprang out of bed and stood to one side of the window as he peered out.

"What's wrong?" Billie asked from the bed.

"It's the caretaker, taking care of the dogs." He watched for a few more minutes. "He's getting back in his truck. He's leaving." He turned back to the bed and slid under the covers. She sidled close to cuddle.

"This is nice," he said the words she wouldn't, couldn't have articulated, but she nodded in agreement and wriggled closer.

They lay like that for a long time, in a half dreamy, half dozing state. Suddenly, Billie jerked and giggled as his erection nudged against her belly. His arms tightened around her. She wasn't a giggler, just like she wasn't a crier, but Dare had made her all those things and more. And it wasn't all bad, she thought, all these new emotions he'd awakened in her. Contrary to what she had always believed she wasn't diminished as a person, she wasn't made weaker just because she had feelings for someone.

Billie lay relishing the emotions she was feeling for this man. When her mother had left her, she'd felt such pain, bearable only because Mama had promised to come back and when she didn't, Billie had lived with that pain over and over again. She'd vowed she'd never believe in anyone again, never care again. She'd make herself tough and unreachable and she had lived that way for years. But what had she really gained? Certainly, she'd never been hurt, but neither had she felt this flare of joy and hope at a man's touch. Now she couldn't stop herself from feeling, from caring, from wanting to touch and be touched by another human being.

She opened her eyes and stared at the handsome, scarred face next to hers, memorizing every detail, every line and crevice, every hair in the flare of black eyebrows, every curve of that mouth that could awaken such lust and passion within her.

His black eyes opened and stared into hers, the dark lights reaching some place deep in her soul, some place she'd hidden away. He'd found it and he knew how to reach it over and over again and he wasn't trying to wound her there in that hidden place, he was wooing her out to the sunshine. Suddenly, he grinned, a wicked grin that only Dare could devise. One devilish brow raised teasingly, challengingly, and she was ready to meet that challenge in more ways than he could ever believe. But there was a difference this time.

"Make love to me like I'm a lady," she whispered. His gaze clouded, his brows drew down in consternation as if he wasn't certain what she wanted from him, then understanding dawned in those black eyes. The line of his mouth softened and he drew her closer and lowered his lips to hers.

Tenderly, he brushed his lips across hers, then brushed his hot tongue across her mouth. She opened for him, her tongue there to taste and spar and give. His hands moved over her, brushing against her curves as if in personal adoration of her body. His touch was gentle, gentler than he'd ever been with her, yet just as arousing. Billie let him lead the way, mirroring his caresses in her own touch on his body.

This wouldn't last, she knew. They had too big an appetite for each other to be gentle and patient all the time, but for now, his touch and hers spoke of something deeper than the blazing lust they shared. Now, they let their bodies and minds communicate a different need, one that was mutual. His hands on her body were soft and knowing and skilled, hers on his body were the same. They'd come to know one another, to know what awakened the desire between them.

She laved her tongue against his. She traced a line of love bites down his flat stomach and onto the tip of his penis, along the length, and back to the tip, where she enclosed him in her mouth. He caught his breath and pushed her away so he could bury his face between her full breasts and suckle the nipples before moving to her crotch. His clever fingers sought her out, finding the nub of her clitoris, lightly touching and retreating repeatedly until she was wild with anticipation for his next touch.

When she writhed beneath his onslaught, he pushed her back and let his tongue do the work his thumb had before. He slipped two fingers into her moist sheath, moving against her wet softness. His tongue flickered across her clitoris, his fingers moved against her. She felt her climax building and tried to move away, tried to wait until he was inside her, but he insisted, holding her still while he continued his gentle onslaught.

"Please, Dare, like a lady," she reminded him and he released her, rearing over her, pulling her knees high and positioning himself. He plunged his cock into her tight sheath, pushing past the clenched muscles and reaching the core of her, which exploded in a million shards of sensations. He withdrew and plunged again, rocking his body against hers, so each time she felt the shattering climax renewed again and again. She was so in tune to him, she felt his cock throb within herself, felt the hot spew of his semen and felt her own earth-quaking response yet again.

She'd heard about multiple orgasm, had even enjoyed them in a detached way at the hands of an experienced lover like Carlos, but none of them had been as shattering, as complete and satisfying as these times with Dare. She clasped his face to hers, scattering kisses of delight, satiation and yes, love.

"You forgot I was a lady," she whispered.

"No, I didn't," he murmured. "A lady is still entitled to satisfaction." He grinned at her in that old cocky way. "Did I deliver?"

Her laughter told him her answer. She kissed him, her tongue pushing against his in a languid caress that told him his lady was satisfied.

"Hey," he said when his stomach growled loudly enough for her to hear. "I'm hungry. Let's get dressed and go see what we can find in the refrigerator."

"I saw some eggs. I could make omelets," she said, scrambling out of bed. She reached for the clothes she'd worn the night before and shivered. She had no desire to pull on anything Carlos might have worn, the traitor. Crossing to a chest of drawers she found lacy panties and a matching bra.

"Wonder who these belonged to?" she asked, pulling on the panties. "Maybe his nymphet."

"Who knows?" Dare buckled his belt and pulled on a clean t-shirt from his backpack. "Sam Udall was associated with a lot of women."

"I know. I used to read the society page. And some of those women were not single." She paused while fastening the lace bra. "I've been thinking, I'm not sure that Charlie would have killed his boss. If he did, he was incredibly stupid because Sam had contacts Charlie could never cultivate. What if it wasn't Charlie who killed him, but instead, an enraged husband?"

"But you saw Charlie there."

Her shoulders slumped. "Yeah, I did." She shook her head. "Nothing makes any sense about this." She crossed to the walk-in closet and searched among the filled hangers. "This stuff had to be for one of his young nymphets," she called. "Real women just wouldn't wear some of this stuff." She finally chose a pair of skinny jeans and a sweater that didn't quite meet the waistband when she donned it. She dove back for a pair of comfortable shoes, rhinestone-decorated tennis shoes.

"Hey, you look cute," Dare said eyeing her figure. "Just don't go ponytails on me."

"Not in a million years," she said brushing out her blonde tangles.

"While you look for food, I'm going to reconnoiter so we don't have any surprises."

"Good idea. I'll look for a coffeepot."

"Princess, I like you better and better."

He disappeared down the stairs. She searched in the bathroom drawers and came up with a bit of face cream and a lipstick which she wiped off with a tissue and applied. Glancing in the mirror, she nodded in satisfaction and headed downstairs in search of food.

"How long do you think it's safe for us to stay here?" she asked later as they lingered over the remnants of breakfast, sipping the strong coffee they both liked.

"Maybe a day or two, if we have to," he answered. "I didn't see any sign of anyone around. Apparently, the help has been let go while the investigation is going on, but soon an heir will come to tally up his take from this mausoleum and we'll have to be out and gone."

She nodded. "In the meantime, I'll make sure not to leave any traces we're here." She sipped her coffee, contemplating. "We have to find some solution for all this."

### Dirty Little Secrets

"I've been thinking about what you said earlier. There are things that just don't make sense and we've got to figure them out. We can't just keep running. We have to stop and think things through, otherwise, Charlie will be one step ahead of us and we'll be dead."

She didn't say anything. What could she say? She thought they were as good as dead anyway, but she didn't make that observation to Dare.

"What about Boyd?" she asked, remembering a comment Dare had made the night before. "How did he ruin your life?"

Dare's expression hardened and for a moment she thought he meant not to answer, then he shrugged.

"Boyd was my partner and he was a dirty cop. He tried to pull me into his deals, but I refused. We both knew eventually I'd have to turn him in so he tried to make me the fall guy. He tripped himself up and barely got away, but the taint of his doubledealing washed off on me. I never could get it off. They didn't have any evidence against me, so they couldn't arrest me, they couldn't even fire me, but they could demote me and that's what happened. They passed me over to the Vice squad, Bunco, and they let me know every day that they think I'm a dirty cop."

His face was filled with pain. She imagined what such a demotion and subsequent ostracism had cost a man his pride. She remained silent, not bothering to go to him and comfort him. There was no comfort from such a blight. He'd endured the stigma alone and he was tougher for it. She understood. She'd borne such dilemmas herself.

"That which doesn't kill you, makes you stronger," she muttered. His head snapped up.

"You're right. But if I have a chance to get my hands on Boyd, I'm going to beat the crap out of him until he clears my name." He paused. "It would make my father damn happy to see me reinstated."

"I hope it happens, Dare," she said softly.

"It's going to," he said. "I thought he'd skipped town, but when you told me last night he was still here and working for Charlie Sweet, I knew I was going to find the son of a bitch and bring him in. Now I just have to figure out what to do about you."

"I'm not your problem," she said. "You don't owe me anything."

He just looked at her. "You don't really believe that I'd just walk away now, do you?"

She held his gaze, her heart pounding. "I wouldn't be good for you, Dare. You can go back and be a homicide detective, but not if you have a woman like me hanging onto your coattails."

"What kind of woman would that be?" he asked coming to stand beside her. "A woman who knows how to take care of herself? A woman who's brave and smart?" he wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled her cheek.

"A woman who's committed many crimes, stealing and conning people out of money." She drew back. "But never old people, never, or people who were too poor to take care of themselves. I just took from the rich bastards who stole money through loopholes in the laws. And people who were too greedy to take a second look and see what I offered was too good to be true."

Dare laughed. "Don't tell me, you've gone all moral on me, Billie?"

"I have my principles," she said indignantly and resisted when he tried to pull her into his arms. Finally, she yielded and tilted her head so he could nuzzle her ear and throat.

"You're too much of a distraction," he murmured. "If I help with the dishes, you want to go back up to bed?"

"We have to work at this," she protested halfheartedly.

"I think better when one head isn't so preoccupied," he teased, one large palm going up to cup her breast.

"Let's hurry with the dishes," she said with a grin. They made quick work of cleaning the kitchen, made another round of the mansion, checking through the windows for any sign of the house staff, but the grounds were empty. They had the mansion to themselves and after days of running from killers and the law, they needed some downtime. Hurriedly, they followed the curving stairway to the second floor and to the guest room they'd claimed for themselves. The hall was bright with dappled sunshine reflecting through the windows. Even the bedroom was flooded with light.

Billie stripped off her borrowed jeans and sweater and lay down on top of the covers and watched Dare as he cast off the last of his clothes and took a flying leap onto the bed, landing on his back staring at the ceiling.

"Holy shit!" he said, his gazed fixed.

"What is it?" She turned and peered up at the ceiling.

"Smile, Princess," he said with a hoot of laughter. "You're on candid camera!"

"What are you talking about?" she demanded, twisting to see more clearly.

"That little dark spot to the right of the chandelier," he said, pointing it out. "I'd bet anything that's a camera and it's sound or motion activated. That means even though Mr. Udall is no longer alive, that camera keeps on going until it runs out of tape." He bounced onto his hip and stared at her. "And if he's got such a setup in this bedroom, what's he got in the other rooms, even in his own bedroom?" He sprang out of bed and drew on his pants without bothering with his underwear.

"Where are you going?" she asked pulling on her own clothes, but he was already heading out of the room. She followed as best she could, tugging the skinny jeans up over her hips as she ran.

"What's the friggin' hurry?" she demanded, irritated. He didn't answer as he turned into Sam Udall's suite and by the time she joined him he was standing on the foot of the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

### Dirty Little Secrets

"Aha! Right there! The son of a bitch." He looked at her, bouncing a little bit in excitement. "Now we know how Udall got so much influence in this town. Nothing like a little sexual hanky-panky to put the screws on a fellow."

"What are you talking about?" She stared up at him.

"Our pal, Sam Udall. He invited politicians and big company CEOs to stay the night, provided them with a little extra company and recorded the whole thing."

"That's not ..." She shrugged, rather than voice her doubts.

"What? Sophisticated enough? Too low-down, backroom sleazy for a man in Udall's position?" Dare shook his head. "No, Billie, this man didn't have any principles. This was just one of the ways he gained power over his contacts, simple, dirty, low-down and damn effective."

"But, Dare, in today's more indulgent society, would that really work?" She held her hands out from her body to illustrate her point.

"Think about it, Princess. How many politicians still go down because they couldn't keep their pants zipped? And worse, some of them have a thing for members of their own sex. If the voting public is still undecided about same sex marriages, how do you suppose they feel about their representatives and state senators having a little hoedown with a same-sex partner? Look at that senator from out West, Summers what's his name."

"Larry Summers."

"You're damn right. And a bunch more," Dare said, bouncing off the bed and coming to take hold of her shoulders. "And Udall didn't just record his guests, he recorded himself. What d'you want to bet that Daddy, the state senator, received a copy of Udall's activities with his daughter?"

"This still doesn't get us any closer to solving his murder, unless..." Her gaze jerked upward. "Unless the cameras started when he and the girl entered the room and it just happened to catch the killer."

Dare's grin said a big, silent "bingo" that made her heart leap. She couldn't believe it would be that simple. She'd been running and hiding and protesting her innocence for so long, she couldn't believe their luck might finally change.

"This could only prove I didn't kill Sam," she said. "It doesn't prove anything about Helen."

"Keep the faith, Billie. We've already talked about Helen. Besides, I can only solve one murder at a time."

He ran back to their bedroom and drew on his shoes, not bothering with socks.

"Where are you going?" she asked, grabbing his arm when he would have swept right past her again.

"We're going to find those cameras and have a peek at what they captured, then we're going to turn in Sweet, or whoever the hell killed the Senator's daughter and Udall." He headed back to the hallway and began opening doors.

"What are we looking for?" she asked trying to keep up.

"A stairway to the attic."

They found it down a side hall behind the linen closet, a narrow set of steep steps that led up to a musty third floor, filled with small, unadorned rooms that had obviously once been the live-in servants' quarters.

"Here's what we're looking for," Dare said when he opened a door to one of the bedrooms. He walked back and forth across the bare wooden floor.

"Hello, what's this?" he said getting down on his knees to study the wide planks. Taking out a pocket knife, he pried at one of the planks, finally pulling up a board to reveal a hidden camera. He opened the camera and whistled.

"Mr. Udall didn't spare the expense. He used the latest in video camera equipment." He pulled out a chip about a quarter of the size and twice as thick as a credit card and handed it to Billie.

"Do you know what that is?"

"An SD card," she answered, holding it up to the light. "It has about four gigs which would give him oh, about two hours of surveillance.

"Mark it with something," he instructed absently. "This came from the bedroom we were in."

"You mean we were being recorded while we were making love?" she asked in outrage.

"Yeah, and I want to look at that one myself, so don't lose it."

She chose not to argue with him, but looked around for a marker or pen she could use. He continued to check the hook up.

"It looks like he had this set up so he could automatically view it through his computer."

"If that's the case then the police should have all this information." Her heart sank. There must not be anything to clear her of the murders. Otherwise, why would they still be hunting her down?

"Maybe they do, but I didn't hear any buzz words about it," Dare said thoughtfully. "Either it wasn't there or -"

"Or someone erased it?" She looked at him. Grimly, he shook his head. "They can still retrieve information, even if it's been erased, even if you blow up the damn computer with one of your grenades. The only thing I can think of is that someone down there is suppressing the information." He looked so discouraged, she didn't bother to make a crack about crooked cops.

"Maybe Sam didn't leave anything on his computer," she said instead. "Maybe there's nothing for them to find."

"Yeah, that would be the smart move. You can find out anything you want about a person from his computer." They moved on to the other bedrooms, collecting SD cards

and noting which room had been recorded. When they reached the last bedroom, Dare bent down and put his eye to the hole.

"We have Sam's room," he said and carefully retrieved the card. His gaze met Billie's. "Want to make some popcorn, Princess? We're going to the movies."

She grinned, his excitement was infectious and what if he was right, what if the films did show Udall's killer? If she were cleared of one murder, wouldn't that make it easier to clear herself of another? She opened her mouth to say something when a sound made her freeze.

"What is it?" Dare asked seeing her expression.

"Shhh! I think someone's here," she whispered. They stayed exactly as they were, muscles rigid. The voices were too far away to make out what was said, but the speakers were coming nearer to the attic stairs.

"Hide," Dare whispered and they scurried to a small closet. Just before he swung the door closed, she noted the footprints they'd left in the dust leading to their hiding place.

*Too late now,* he mouthed and pulled the door closed. Breathlessly they listened as heavy footsteps climbed the stairs and disappeared down the hall.

"God-dammit," someone bellowed.

"What is it? What's wrong?" a voice asked, footsteps echoed across the uncarpeted hallway as the speaker went to join his companion. Both voices were masculine and from their loud tread, it sounded as if they were pretty big guys.

"I wonder if they're carrying guns," Billie whispered.

"I'd bet on it," Dare said. "I don't much like our odds right now."

He glanced at Billie who was doing her best to hold back a sneeze, her gaze colliding with his in a frantic appeal. Without thinking he pinched her nostrils between his thumb and forefinger. Involuntarily, she jerked against him, fighting for air.

"Breathe through your mouth," he whispered and strained to hear what was going on down the hall.

"Somebody's been here and cleared out the SD cards, maybe the cops," one man said belligerently. "The boss is not going to like this."

"Maybe Sam took them out himself before he got bumped."

"That doesn't sound right. The boss said he always had his cameras ready to tape anyone who showed up." There was a pause.

"We'd better check all the cameras, just to be sure," the lead guy said and their footsteps faded as they went into another bedroom. Cautiously, Dare opened the closet door and looked at Billie. She cupped her tender nose and glared at him. He held up a warning finger and pulled her toward the hall. Tiptoeing, they headed for the back stairs, praying their intruders didn't step back into the hall and spot them.

As careful as they were, they made some scuffling sounds on the stairs and heard quick footsteps above them.

"Hey, Frank, where are you going?" one of the men called. "Oh, I thought you were leaving. I heard something."

"Check it out."

Billie's gaze met Dare's and she motioned toward the linen closet and scooted inside just as heavy footsteps started down the stairs. Crammed as they were against each other, she could feel his shaky breath and knew it matched her own. The smell of lavender and freshly laundered linen mingled with dust. She took a deep breath and blew it out her nostrils, trying to control a sneeze.

"Don't you dare," he whispered in her ear and she gulped, ducking her head away from him. If he grabbed her nose again, she'd grab a few parts of his anatomy and she wouldn't be gentle. They waited in breathless silence as heavy footsteps eased down the steps.

Dare pushed Billie to the floor. She shuffled some blankets aside and crawled below the bottom shelf, pulling the linens around herself. A slight shuffle told her Dare was doing the same.

The door opened and a tall, thin man stuck his head inside the closet. She prayed he wouldn't turn on the light. They weren't that well hidden. Then he shifted and she caught a glimpse of a gun. The man looked tough, his expression tight and alert. She guessed not much got past him. She held her breath and prayed the gods were listening for once and wouldn't bring on a sneeze.

With a final glance around the man left, closing the door behind him. They waited for what seemed an eternity while he searched the hall. Finally, his heavy footsteps headed up the stairs again.

"Let's go," Dare whispered and crawled out of his hiding space. She didn't need a second invitation. She wanted out of this cursed mansion, now. They could still hear the guys above as they headed for the carpeted stairs to the main floor. Billie hesitated as Dare started down.

"What?" he whispered impatiently, turning to glare at her.

"We left our clothes out in the bedroom." She reminded him. "We need to get them before they discover someone's been living here."

"They'll know if they catch us."

She rolled her eyes, just like a man to take that attitude. "It'll just take a minute." Without waiting for his reply, she sprinted barefooted down the hall, glad she hadn't taken time to put on her shoes earlier. In the bedroom, she grabbed up what she thought they'd need and threw the rest under the bed, then peered 'round the door. Too late. Two men appeared at the other end of the hall. She drew back, breathing deeply, saying a little prayer.

At the top of the stairs, Dare heard the men coming and cursed silently. Damn Billie, she always did things the hard way. In the meantime he was in a quandary. He wasn't about to run off and leave her and he couldn't stay where he was. He'd be spotted the minute they looked his way. He dropped to his stomach and slithered partway down the stairs, hugging the balustrade to minimize his exposure.

The two men were pissed-off, he could see in the way they moved and the stiff tilt of their heads. They weren't used to failing. These guys were professionals. At the first bedroom, they turned inside. On his belly, Dare climbed to the top step and was nearly stepped on by Billie, who slid down beside him. They lay listening for sounds from the bedrooms, then scooted backward down the stairs. At the bottom, they waited, peering overhead. They could hear the intruders for a brief moment as they regained the hall, then disappeared into another bedroom. Neither of them seemed inclined to look down the staircase. Not a mistake they normally made, Dare guessed.

When the way was clear again, he grabbed Billie's hand and headed for the back of the house and the kitchen. He gave the countertops a quick glance as they sailed through.

"Thank god we cleaned it before going upstairs," Billie muttered. Dare clasped her hand in a silent warning to be remain quiet.

They crept down the basement steps and into the pool room.

"Wait," he warned when she reached for the door handle. She looked at him questioningly. "We don't know how many guys they have around here. If we go out there, the dogs are going to bark and alert them. Let's just hide in here for now."

They settled behind an overstuffed couch that angled against one corner. Dare found a place where he could watch the door from the house and the one to the pool.

"Who are those guys?" Billie whispered beside him. "Do you think they belong to Sweet?"

He shook his head. "They're too polished, too alert. I think they're professionals."

"Professional what? And who sent them?"

He could see her alarm and figured she was right to worry. He wasn't sure he could answer her question, but she didn't insist. They fell silent, his thoughts on the tangled events that ensnared them.

Dare wasn't sure how much time passed before they heard a ruckus outside. He hurried to the door and peered out, then motioned her forward. Keeping low, they rushed to the wrought iron pool gate and peered through the bars at the driveway where the two men who had searched the upstairs were making a mad dash for a car, followed by a couple of irate Doberman pinschers with teeth flashing. The men barely got their car doors open when the dogs leaped, tearing and snarling.

Billie saw the fangs of one of the dogs sink deep into the wrist of the driver before he was finally able to ward off the hound within the safety of the car. With both men safely inside, the dogs howled their frustration and paced around the car. One leaped on the hood of a silver sedan and took a stance baying his triumph to the defeated within. Finally, the driver started the motor and jammed the gas pedal so the car roared

forward flinging the Doberman off onto the cement. Both dogs chased them down the driveway.

"This might be a good time for us to try to escape ourselves. The dogs are occupied," Billie said, heading back to the pool house with purpose.

"Oh, no," Dare said. "Where would we go? Besides, those nasty four-legged, man'sbest-friends are going to get tired of chasing that car and come back. If we're anywhere out in the open, they'll try to finish what they started with those guys."

"So, we're just trapped here?" She shook her head vehemently. "We can't just stay here indefinitely. What would we do in all that time? Eventually we'd be caught either by the bad guys or the cops. Oh, they're the same." Dare scowled at her to show his disappointment. "All right, all cops aren't bad." He grinned, accepting her apology without making a big deal out of it. He wasn't one to hold grudges.

"Okay," she said in resignation. "What do we do now?"

"Exactly what we were doing when those two guys showed up."

"I'm just not in the mood anymore."

"Not that, Princess, although if you were in the mood, I'd be happy to oblige, but the point is this house hides a lot of secrets and we haven't explored half of them." He turned back the way they'd come glancing over his shoulder to be sure she was following.

"What about the SD cards? I thought we were going to see what those revealed."

"We're going to, Billie, and not only that, we're going to tear this house apart." He climbed the stairs backward so he could look at her and make his points. "I had a lot of time to think when we were waiting for those guys to finish up. They took their time and they were thorough, so what were they looking for?" Back in the kitchen he scattered the SD cards on the counter and looked at them.

"I couldn't stop thinking about something you said earlier today," he went on. "Why would Sweet, a small-time hood, kill off the boss who offers him a piece of pie much bigger than any he'll ever have access to on his own?"

"Who can say with Charlie? He's half nuts, anyway," Billy said. "You know, I never really saw who pulled the trigger on Sam Udall. I was in the closet and I didn't actually see Charlie until I got downstairs. My instinct was that they were searching the place."

"See, that's what I mean. We need to go back and look at every detail."

"If Charlie didn't kill Sam then who—" Her gaze met his. "About a thousand people in Detroit alone."

"He certainly made enemies and now that we have these SD cards we know he was blackmailing people for money, influence, whatever, but we know for certain Udall was not a nice man." He stacked up the cards and headed toward the media room behind the library then turned back when she lagged behind. "I was just trying to remember something you said, something important, but I can't put my finger on what it was," she said, shaking her head. "Maybe it'll come to me later."

The media room was every man's dream with deep, leather armchairs, a big-screen television and speakers throughout. It also held every latest electronic gadget that had ever been invented and a huge plasma screen.

"Wow," Dare said. "I want a room just like this when I get married and have kids and a home of my own," he declared fervently. He glanced at her and grinned.

"You look like a little boy at Christmastime," she said then grew serious. "The show is about to begin," he declared, heading for the clutter of electronic machines. "Have a seat, Princess, and make yourself comfortable."

He came back to sit in the chair beside hers, the remote in hand. The carefree mood that had claimed him earlier was gone. He pressed the button and fixed his gaze on the screen.

The scene from their bedroom came up first. Billie gasped and Dare grinned in anticipation as the screen revealed a couple making love, then the figures shifted, revealing someone other than the two of them. It didn't take long though to realize that the woman was a hooker. She was very skilled, knowing just what to do and when to back off to prolong her partner's pleasure. The sound of the man's groans filled the air and still she wouldn't give him release.

"Enough," Dare said and rose to put another card in. This bedroom was unfamiliar to Billie, but the scenario was all too real. Two men rolled around on the bed together in a sexual wrestling match that would obviously end in something much more intimate.

"I don't think we need to see this," Dare said with a slight flush on his cheeks. Billie glanced at him. He stiffened, his gaze still on the screen.

"Son of a bitch, do you see who that is?" he asked. Billie looked back at the screen. The men had changed positions again and the face of one was clearly visible. She started, obviously recognizing the face as well.

"State Senator Richard Bodden," she said softly. They watched a few more minutes until the two men changed positions again. Dare's thumb reached for the off button, then hesitated as he straightened. From the screen came the sound of a door opening.

"Oh, excuse me," a female voice said and the door closed again.

"Do you think she saw me?" a voice asked with some anxiety.

"No, she saw only me," a second voice answered. Dare had clicked the off button.

"Wait," Billie said. "I thought that voice sounded familiar. Never mind."

"That explains our two callers," Dare said, getting up to retrieve the card. "Do you realize what we have here?"

"Clearly, Bodden's career would be down the toilet if this got out."

"He found out about Sam's little hobby and sent his men to retrieve or destroy any evidence that showed he'd ever been here." He glanced at her, frowning. "This gets worser and worser."

"Worser and worser," she echoed, quirking an eyebrow at him. "You read *Alice in Wonderland*?"

Dare grinned boyishly. "If you tell anyone, I'll have to kill you."

"Do you think Bodden was the one who shot Sam that night in an attempt to stop his blackmailing? But how did Sweet get involved in all this?"

"Bodden didn't pull the trigger himself, that's for damn sure, but he might have hired Sweet to do the dirty work."

"That makes better sense. Like you said before, why would Sweet kill the golden goose?"

"Unless Bodden made him an offer he couldn't refuse." Dare grinned as he uttered the old cliché. His spirits were high. "We're on the trail of something big."

"I'd bet big money you won't stop until you reach the end. Let's just be careful, Dare. Some of these guys play for keeps as we've already seen." She paused then and grinned at him. "All I've been able to do is run for cover. Now I'm fighting back and it feels good, damn good."

"About damn time." Dare inserted another card and settled back to watch, concentrating on the screen. What else would they find out about the sleazy world of the state's politically and socially elite? He'd always thought the con artists, prostitutes, scammers and grifters were the scum of the city, now he knew people like Billie were Little Bo Peep compared to these guys.

The next tape revealed a CEO of a big car company performing cunnilingus on a young woman barely out of her teens and the next was a simple and albeit normal act of intimacy between two people who seemed to care for and respect each other.

"The Mother Theresa of Detroit," Dare said referring to the well-known woman who headed up a large philanthropic organization for one of the wealthiest families of the state. "And that's city councilman Jed Russell with her."

"They really seem to have feelings for each other," Billie observed. "So why would they come here to be together? Why not rent a motel room?"

"They, obviously, didn't know about Sam's little hobby." Dare was at the machine with yet another card.

"He must have kept it well hidden except to those unlucky enough to be caught." Billie muttered. "You know what, I'm glad I bilked him out of a half-million dollars."

"A-a half-million?" He stared at her, his mouth hanging open. "That's enough money to get you killed."

"Twenty dollars is enough money to get you killed, if you aren't careful," she answered. He could only stare at her. She seemed so certain. For the first time, it really hit him, the depth of differences between their two lives. Damn! He shook himself. "Last card." He pushed the button. The interior of Sam's bedroom came up. There was movement in the corner of the room followed by a pinpoint flare of light. "Someone's in there."

"That's coming from his computer room," Billie said. "I think that shadowy figure was me. I went directly there." The light in the corner wobbled then went out.

"I heard someone coming up the stairs," she explained, "so I turned out the light and headed for the closet. I thought it was Sam Udall, but someone else came up ahead of him." She didn't turn her gaze from the film, leaning forward and squinting as if not to miss anything. Another shadow moved across the screen, a man who looked around then entered the walk-in closet, closing the door behind him.

"What do you think?" Dare asked. "Does the figure on the screen look like one of the men who came here today?"

"It's hard to tell. That's not a good view of his face and I was looking at him from inside the closet." She continued to watch the screen. Suddenly, there was the sound of laughter and two people entered, one a tall heavyset man with graying hair and the other a young woman with blonde hair flowing down her back. One of them flicked on a small lamp beside the bed.

"That would be Miss Amanda Garret, nymphet extraordinaire and daughter of State Senator Ted Garret," Dare said cynically.

"Poor kid, she has no idea what's coming," Billie said softly.

In the film Amanda knelt in front of Sam Udall and glanced up at him, her gaze impish and admiring at the same time. Slowly, she unzipped his pants, teasing him until he finally reached down and released his belt and let the pants drop down around his ankles. His shorts quickly followed. His cock sprang out like an eager puppy for a man his age. Amanda licked the tip of his cock teasingly until he cupped his hands around her head and rammed his cock into her mouth. All was silent save for an occasional moan.

The shot came loud and startling. Billie jumped. Dare kept his eyes glued to the screen. Sam and Amanda had fallen right where they were.

"Son of a bitch, they were right," he said absently. "She still had his dick in her mouth." He tensed and pointed at the screen. "There's the gunman. He just came out of the closet. You can see his face better now. What do you think?"

"He's the one who stuck his head in the linen closet when we were hiding," Billie said and shrank back in her chair.

"My thinking, too." They watched as the man exited the room. All was quiet for a frame or two, then another man entered and paused beside the dead couple.

"Boyd, my loyal partner," Dare muttered. "You son of a bitch. I've caught you now."

Boyd didn't linger, but hurried from the room. After a time, the sound of a door opening came to them and a shadow moved in the background. Cautiously, the figure moved into the light.

"That's you, Billie," Dare said glancing at her. She was pale and silent, her eyes wide as she'd just witnessed the murders all over again. When she didn't speak, he took her hand and shook it slightly.

"Do you know what this means, Billie? This film clears you of Sam's murder."

# **Chapter Ten**

"Don't you get it, Billie? We can prove you're innocent of Sam's murder," Dare repeated. "And I can prove that Boyd was at the murder scene, what's more it shows that he's working for Sweet."

"Oh well," she said finally, gasping for a breath. "One down, one to go." She gripped his hands hard, like a drowning man who's just been thrown a lifeline.

"We have to take this to the police, but how do we get past those demon dogs?"

"They won't stop us." He retrieved the SD card showing the murder and stuck it in his pocket. The rest he tossed into a small drawer of the cabinet. "We don't need these. Before we leave here though, I want to search the place."

"Why? We have what we want." She stared at him doubtfully.

"Not yet, Princess. Sam had a lot of secrets and he couldn't take them with him and the police haven't found any of them or the word would have been out, so they must still be here. That's why those two guys were taking so long with their search."

"Maybe they found what Sam hid."

"Maybe not. Let's take a look ourselves. But let's be smart about it. We can't get to Sam's computer, the police have it and maybe there's nothing there anyway. Maybe he put everything on a disk or a thumb drive."

"Of course, that way he hasn't left anything incriminating on his computer for anyone to find," Billie said.

"So what do you think he used?"

She perched on the chair arm and considered. "I think he'd likely use a thumb drive."

"Any idea where he'd keep something like that?"

"If you don't want it to be immediately available to anyone, you might hide it." She shrugged. "I would. Especially if I were a blackmailer like Udall. I'd rent a safe deposit box and store it there."

"What if you weren't a safe deposit kind of guy? What if you just wanted to keep your material handy but you didn't want anyone getting to it?" Dare insisted.

"Well, then I'd find some place to hide it."

"Just what I was thinking." He snapped his fingers and paced the room. "So we have to search. Something that small will be hard to find.

Let's get looking." He headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time.

"You search his computer room and I'll take his bedroom. Search every nook and cranny."

They went through every drawer, every shelf, every book. Dare looked behind pictures and around the edges of the rug for hidden pockets while Billie searched the closet where she'd hidden during Udall's murder. They looked for any niche in which a thumb drive might be concealed and came up empty.

"Hey, he has a safe," Dare called and Billie hurried into the bedroom. He had taken down a Winslow Homer painting and was admiring the wall safe. "What a beauty."

"What we want is probably in there." She went closer to study the safe from different angles.

"What are you looking for?" Dare asked.

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Did you forget? After all, this is getting into my expert zone now."

"Oh, yeah," Dare said and tried not to think of Billie as a safe robber. "The question is, how the hell are we going to get into it? As solid as that baby is, it'll take a truckload of dynamite to get it open."

"Or a light touch," Billie said. She hurried back to Sam's computer room and pulled open a drawer. "I remember seeing this handy little gadget earlier," she called over her shoulder and dug out a small electronic box and brought it back to the safe. Dare watched dumbfounded as she attached a couple of small cables to the dial and flicked it on. Numbers spun around and filled the line of empty spaces above the spinning dial. When it was finished, a row of numbers blinked.

Billie grinned at him, her dimples showing.

She spun the dial to the combination. The numbers clicked in and she twisted the handle. The safe sprung open. Eagerly, they scanned through the papers and bundles of bills.

"He sure didn't believe in banks," Dare commented, stacking another bundle of large bills next to the ones already on the night table.

"That must be his emergency fund. Any criminal with good sense keeps one." She frowned. "Thanks to Carlos mine was stolen."

"Christ, what kind of an emergency was Udall expecting?" Dare asked, pulling out more stacks of bills.

"Obviously, not the one that stopped him," Billie reminded him and put aside the last of the papers. "There's no thumb drive here and from the letters and papers, I'd say this is not where he kept his records."

She slid down the wall and drew up her knees. She looked as exhausted and disheartened as Dare felt. He was also developing a terrific headache and his stomach grumbled with hunger.

"What do you suggest next?" she asked, watching as he returned the money and papers to the safe.

### Dirty Little Secrets

"We look some more. It's a big house. He must have it hidden somewhere." He raised his eyes to the ceiling. "Maybe we'll try the attic or the basement. Remember that guy who hid his stash in the ceiling of his basement?"

"And that guy in New Orleans who hid 90k in the freezer? At any rate, we know it's not here in his bedroom. I'm starving." She got to her feet and headed for the bathroom. "Let's get something to eat and re-plan our strategy."

"Damn, it's got to be here somewhere. I feel like we might find it at any minute," Dare muttered under his breath, loath to stop even for a minute.

"Well, we've certainly tried." She dug in the medicine cabinet for some aspirins. "At least we still have the SD cards, which show I didn't kill Udall."

"At least, we have that," he muttered, "but I was hoping for more, a name or something and maybe a hint as to where I can find the man we saw on the tape, and who nearly saw us in the closet." He stood in the bathroom door watching her as she shook two aspirins into her hand and filled a water glass to wash them down. Suddenly, she stared at the other prescription bottles in the medicine cabinet. She took one down and read its ingredients.

"He had prescription sleeping pills," she said and studied the other medicine. "And a bottle of Prinzide, one of Paxil and another of Prinzide."

"So, he had high blood pressure and depression and didn't sleep well," Dare said. "It's good to hear even big-shot criminals have their problems."

"But look at this," Billie persisted. "There's something about this second bottle of Prinzide. The date's an old one. Why would he keep an outdated bottle of medicine?" She took it down and shook it then grinned at Dare.

"What?" he asked, straightening.

Billie held up the prescription bottle. I think we've found what we're looking for." She took off the cap and pulled out the round cylinder.

"Damn, you're good," he said coming to take it from her. He turned it this way and that. "You'd think he would have put it in a safe deposit box or at the very least in his safe."

"Like you thought, he wanted it close by and figured anyone could break into his safe. We did."

"Now we just need to see what's on here." He looked around and cursed the efficiency of the Detroit police department for taking the computers.

"So, where can we go look at this?" she asked.

"A coffee house."

"I know just the one," she said. "I can already taste the strong black coffee and Asiago bagels with cream cheese and they have free internet service."

"You're drooling," he teased.

"Let's get going." She headed for the stairs.

"Now wait, we have to plan this carefully. We don't want to be eaten alive by those mad dogs out there." He stood talking to himself drawing diagrams in the air. "Maybe if I sneak out I could get to their pens and lock them in."

"I have a better way," she said and disappeared down the stairs.

"What do you have in mind?" he asked, hurrying after her.

"Never mind, just gather up what we need." In the kitchen she threw open the freezer door and half disappeared inside, cussing, her arms moving as she dug through packages of wrapped meat. Dare eyed her trim behind, remembering the way she'd looked lying nude against that red satin spread, then he shook his mind clear of distractions as he considered what they must do next.

She backed out of the freezer flourishing two thick steaks and without bothering to unwrap them, tossed them into the microwave and turned it on defrost.

"Wish I was preparing these for us," she said peering through the small window. She shook herself and straightened. "Next problem. I think we need some guns, since we had to run without the other ones and we keep running into some pretty nasty characters."

"Guns it is, Princess," he said. She followed him back to the front of the house to Sam's den, not to be confused with the media room. This room was surrounded with filled bookshelves from floor to ceiling, dealing with nearly every topic a man would want to know. But there were no guns.

"You'd think a man of Sam Udall's position who had the kind of enemies he must have known he had, would keep some kind of fire power."

"Maybe it's hidden," she said and walked around the room, pushing corners and carvings, but nothing happened. It wasn't until they returned to where they'd started that her hand fell against a set of books by Henry Miller that one shelf sprang out from the wall revealing a rack of guns and ammunition.

"Hello, Billie," Dare said looking over the display. "How did you know this was here?"

"I didn't," she said bluntly. "I just know the mindset of a criminal and how he operates." He tilted his head and sent her a sidelong glance.

They gathered up the weapons they thought they'd need and plenty of ammunition.

"I've got the SD card and thumb drive," Dare said heading toward the door.

"I'm almost ready." Billie ran upstairs and soon reappeared with a prescription bottle in her hand. Dare watched as she doctored the thawed steaks liberally with Sam's sleeping medication.

"Two big fat steaks coming up," she said taking the bags to the back door. "How are we going to do this?"

"I'm going to toss them into their pen and run like hell. When I signal, you head for the garage at a dead run."

#### Dirty Little Secrets

He took the steaks and walked toward the pens. Immediately, the dogs who'd taken up a position at the corner of the house, leaped to their feet, growling and snarling. They threw themselves forward in a race toward Dare but by that time he'd launched the steaks over the fence and into the pen. The two animals were sidetracked and fell on the meat, snarling and biting as if they'd never been fed. Quickly, he slammed the door shut and latched it, then motioned to Billie.

She met him in the long garage that housed an impressive array of a rich man's cars. They walked along a line that contained a Lamborghini, Mercedes-Benz and a half-dozen other cars that cost more money than most men made in a lifetime. Ten minutes later they were parking a dark green Peugeot they'd deemed the least noticeable of all of Sam's trophy cars beside a beat-up sedan at the nearest coffee house. Inside, they ordered lattes and bagel sandwiches and settled themselves behind a fairly new PC.

"Okay, stick it in," Dare whispered. A woman with a look of an academic, glanced at them, startled, then flipped her dark hair and went back to her own screen.

Billie grinned at the scowl Dare gave her but did as he asked, typing in the appropriate responses. A menu came up with a list of files. Billie clicked on the first file and the screen filled with columns of names and numbers.

"Holy shit!" he whispered beside her. "Slow it down so I can read it."

He sat for a long time studying the material. They became so caught up in what they'd found, he hardly noticed time passing or the shifting of patrons as some left and new ones came. Their coffee and sandwiches sat forgotten.

They skimmed through the lists of payouts to politicians and favors called in by others. The files held the whole network of Sam Udall's power structure and it was enough to blow the lid off the state and city political system. Sam Udall's long arm had reached all the way to Lansing, possibly even to the nation's capital.

Dare was suddenly aware of just what they had in their hands and the danger they could be in for possessing it.

"So this is what Sweet was looking for that night Sam was killed. When he saw me at the bottom of the stairs, he thought I had it and he was determined to retrieve it. Without this information, he had no real power the way Sam had."

"But he didn't kill Sam. Someone else did."

"But he knew Sam was going to be taken down that night. That's why he was there, to steal this material. With this, he would be the untouchable kingpin for the rest of his life."

They looked at each other. "Nah. He didn't have the brains Sam had," Dare said.

"Then what?" she asked in frustration. "We're missing something. Who else would have been looking for this material?"

They sat thinking.

"So what do we do with all this knowledge we've gained?" she asked softly.

"We need to get it to the police," Dare muttered, glancing around the coffee shop and noticing, not for the first time, one of the waiters who seemed too interested in them. In fact, that same waiter had been on the phone a few minutes ago and his furtive air had been what caught Dare's attention.

"We need to get back under cover."

"Not back to Sam's place?" she protested.

"No, not to Sam's. If anyone's picked up on us here, they'll note the car we came in which would be a dead giveaway we hid out at Sam's. I'll think of someplace. In the meantime, we need to get this material to the police." He hailed their waiter. "We need an envelope about this size." He measured out his specifications. "Any way you can help us out?"

When it was brought, he addressed it, wrapped the SD card and flash drive in paper napkins, packed them in the envelope and sealed it shut, his police precinct clearly marked on the front.

"Let's go," he said, taking Billie's hand. Outside, he crossed to a mailbox and dropped the envelope inside, then hurried toward the Peugeot. They braced themselves against the cold, fierce wind that had come up in the few hours they were in the coffee shop.

Inside the car, Dare lost no time in leaving the parking lot, his glance going to the mirror time and again. Billie was also watching out the back window.

"I don't think we were followed," she said finally and faced toward the front.

"Here, take these." He passed over the thumb drive and SD card. In consternation, Billie looked at them and then at him.

"What the hell did you do? I saw you mail these myself."

"And so did half the coffee shop, especially a couple of the waiters who watched us a little too closely, but they didn't see me slip the thumb drive out of the napkins before I put them in the envelope."

"Are you paranoid or something? There was no one in there who knew us."

"There was someone who was a little too interested in what we were doing and he made a phone call. I didn't want to take a chance. If he wasn't a spy for Sweet or for some other guy we don't know about yet, then there's no harm done. In the meantime, they think the information we were perusing in there was mailed off to the police. Since the pickup has already occurred, that envelope is encased in hard steel overnight until tomorrow's pickup. It will buy us a little time and they're just going to have to be content with waiting to snatch the information when it gets to the police station."

"You're not saying there's someone at the police department working for Charlie," she said with some sarcasm.

"I'm not taking any chances. Boyd was a dirty cop and he had a partner. The police think it was me, but it wasn't."

"Do you have any idea who?"

"Some thoughts. I just can't prove it yet. I didn't see his name on Sam's list, but it's got to be there."

She took a deep breath and looked at the material he'd given her, the material that would prove her innocence.

"So, why aren't we going to the police?"

"We will, in the morning. We'll walk in there and give this information to the captain and tell our story. There won't be anyone else handling that material until it's been shown and duly recorded. It's not going to just disappear and leave us with nothing to prove our accusations."

"In the meantime, where are we spending the night?"

"In the meantime, it's time you meet Mama."

"I thought you didn't want to go to your family except as a last resort."

"It is a last resort," he answered then to lighten the gravity of their situation, he flashed a grin. He guessed she wasn't ready for this next step and neither was he.

# **Chapter Eleven**

"Is this where your parents live?" Billie asked in dismay, looking around at the row of abandoned houses and debris-cluttered front yards. This was the worst of the worst neighborhoods Detroit had to offer. Night had fallen, making the area look even more menacing.

"We're leaving the car here. Help me wipe it down for fingerprints." He took out his handkerchief and rubbed at the steering wheel and the door, then passed the cloth over so she could do the same.

"We'll never get all the prints off this way," she said, scrubbing at the door handle.

"We don't have to be too careful. By morning this baby won't be here anyway. It'll be in some guy's chop shop or on its way to a new paint job and a trip abroad." They climbed out and Dare led the way toward the end of the block where a gas station cast its lonely light. From there they called a cab and headed to Southgate.

Dare directed the driver down a street where small but neat Cape Cods sat in spacious yards outlined with white picket fences and flowerbeds. The taxi pulled to a stop before one of them. Suddenly, Billie felt nervous and shy, a condition that hadn't afflicted her since Monsignor caught her pinning Bobby Berry to the gate at the Children's Home the day he tried to look up her communion dress.

A large, cheery-faced woman, who resembled Dare, opened the door.

"Darius," she cried and threw her arms around him.

"Hey, Mama." He hugged and kissed her affectionately then swung her around. "Are you going to invite us in?"

"Sure, sure, you come in. This is your home." The woman glanced at Billie warily. "You bring a guest."

"This is Billie, Mama," he said as if that were all the introduction she needed. Billie held out her hand.

"I'm happy to meet you, Mrs. Stefanos."

"Sophia, you call me Sophia," she said with a big smile, but her dark eyes held reservations. "Come back to the kitchen. I get you something to eat." She led the way and took the opportunity to pull her son aside. Billie pretended not to hear their interchange.

"Darius, why do you bring this girl here? I want for you a nice Greek girl," she whispered.

"Not a nice Greek girl, Mama, a nice American girl," he grinned at her then turned his gaze toward Billie. She couldn't help herself. She felt herself blush like some damn school girl. "Well, you come and eat now. You didn't come to dinner on Sunday and I made a nice lamb roast and zelnick. Cheesefare Sunday starts next week and I must use up all my dairy and meat." She glanced at Billie. "Sit down," she ordered and bustled around the kitchen putting out platters of food and serving hot cups of coffee.

Since they'd become so engrossed in the information revealed by the thumb drive, neither had eaten their sandwiches at the coffee house or even sipped their big mugs of coffee, so now Billie fell on her food and ate with gusto. Sophia watched with approval. When their hunger was assuaged, they lingered over a dessert of baklava and more coffee.

Now that her stomach was no longer rumbling with hunger, Billie glanced around noticing more details of the house where Dare grew up. Though modest and oldfashioned, everything was immaculately kept, with scarves and table cloths and cloth napkins. No food out of a box or plastic silverware here. Through the small archway she could see the living room with comfortable worn sofas and a television, turned to the evening news.

Sophia questioned her son on his activities, on work, on his friends, his weight. He was too thin, as was Billie. She was just as thorough in her prying into Billie's life, but it was done with such forthrightness, that she didn't mind. Like her son, this woman was a force unto herself, but more than that, she was a mother who cared about her son. Billie wished she'd had a mother like her.

Still she tried to be cautious, tried not to like Sophia too much, tried not to reveal too much about herself, tried to remember her life did not parallel these people's, tried not to want to be part of this family. Her reality was one of scams and double-dealing. She lived by her wits. These people operated by a different code than she. Her past was tainted by illegal scams.

"You're a nice American girl," Sophia said, nodding as if satisfied with something. "You have no reason to be sad." She came to stand in front of Billie and cupped her hands around her face in a tender gesture. Her dark eyes, so like Dare's, saw too much. She would have pulled away, but she feared offending the woman.

Sophia studied her for a long moment, looking into her eyes as if reading all her history there. Finally, she nodded again.

"She loves you, Darius," she said, "but she is like a hurt little child inside. You must be careful not to injure her further."

"I know, Mama."

"You must always tell her the truth, only that will comfort her, no matter how bad it is."

"I know. I will."

"He will never abandon you," Sophia said and Billie's eyes filled with tears. How had the old woman known her deepest fears?

"Are you a gypsy?" she asked, blinking against the sting in her eyes. Lord, don't let her cry. She never cried. Don't let her start now.

"No, child," Sophia said wiping away the tear tracks with her thumb, her hands still warm on Billie's cheek, a mother's touch. "I am no gypsy," she declared, removing her hands. "Gypsies are thieves and vagabonds. They steal from people and run away to steal some more."

Billie felt her heart constrict. "I didn't mean to offend you. I...was just trying to understand how you know so much about me."

Dare laughed. "Mama has amazed us all with her deductive skills. She always knew when we did something wrong. Imagine growing up with that. I had to be perfect all the time."

"And you never were," Sophia said, planting her hands on her hips. "Oh, you were a good boy, but many times you did things that were wrong." She shook her finger at him, then relented. "In the end you made the right choices." They laughed together. Billie had never felt more the outsider.

Sophia seemed to sense her mood.

"Do not feel bad about yourself," she said. "It is not how you came to be but who you are now that counts."

"But I've done many bad things. I was a...gypsy myself."

"You are not a gypsy," Sophia said. "You are a survivor and that is all that counts. Darius must feel the same way or he would not have brought you here."

She turned to her son. "That reminds me, Darius, a couple of your friends came looking for you."

"Oh?" He straightened in his chair and glanced at Billie. "Did they leave a name?"

"Yes, I write it down. She turned to a cabinet drawer and removed a paper. "It was Lieutenant Phillip Me-Merkel."

Dare visibly relaxed. "Did he say what he wanted?"

She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. "He said he'd call you. Then a few hours later, another man came, not so nice."

"Did he leave his name?" The tension was back in Dare's voice, his body tight as a coiled spring.

Again Sophia shook her head.

"What did he look like? Can you describe him?"

"Oh, yes, he was a tall, thin man with a mean look on his face. He scared me. He was dressed in a nice suit and tie, nicer than what Papa buys, and his shoes were polished like he was going to church, but this is not a man who goes to church to say his prayers."

"What did he say, Mama, and what did you tell him?"

She shrugged again and crossed her plump arms at her waist. "He wants you, and I say you're not here and he wants to know where you are and I say I do not know. My son is a grown man. He does not tell me these things." She paused and narrowed her

eyes. "That is when I feel the most afraid of him, but he goes away then or I think he does, but later I see a man around the corner who looks like him, so I do not know." She looked at Dare, noting his reaction. "He's a bad man, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he's a bad man." He pushed his chair back and checked his ankle pistol.

"Oh, Darius," his mother cried, hands on her cheeks, her eyes wide with terror.

"It's okay, Mama. I want you to go Aunt Mitzi's and call Papa to come there after work."

"But why? I can't just leave my home."

"Yes, you can. I want you to go now."

"But I have to put away the food and clean the dishes."

"You have to go now," Dare said with urgency.

She looked at him. "You are in trouble, Darius?"

"Yeah, for the moment I am, and I'm sorry I brought it to you, but it'll be okay in the long run. Right now I want you to put on your coat and go to Aunt Mitzi's." His mother hesitated, glancing at the food.

"I'll put it away for you, Sophia." Billie rose and shoved the leftover roast into a plastic bag. She continued putting away the remains of the meal so there was nothing for Sophia to do but follow her son's instructions.

"I go, then. Come with me, Darius. You do not want Billie to be in danger."

"She's already in danger, and I have to keep her near to protect her. I love you, Mama."

"I love you too." She hugged her son, ignoring his impatience to be done with the goodbyes.

"I'll go ahead and check things out. You wait for two minutes and follow." He glanced at Billie. "Stay here and stay out of sight. I'll be right back." He disappeared into the night.

Sophia looked at Billie, terror in her eyes.

"He'll be all right," Billie said quietly. "He's a smart, tough man. Right now, he just wants to know you're safe."

Sophia bit back a sob and threw her arms around Billie. "I will love you as my own daughter." Then she was gone, out the back door and down the dark alley.

Billie stood at the door and watched as the older woman disappeared into the black night. She waited, straining to see, but even the moon was hidden by clouds. Finally, she heard a dog yapping and a man cursing, then all was quiet again. Sighing deeply, she told herself he'd be safe. Sophia had said he would never abandon her and she trusted Sophia as she trusted Dare. To prove her belief in the two, she hurried back and cleared the table. If he didn't make it back soon, she'd go look for him, but no sooner had the thought passed through her mind than the back door was flung open and he was there.

"Get down," he said urgently and she ducked below the sink. With one quick sweep of his hand, he turned out the light. "Have you got your gun with you?"

"Of course." She fumbled in the copious handbag she'd "borrowed" from Sam's guest room.

"Good, keep it handy. I'm going to take a look out front." He disappeared into the back hall. She crouched where she was, studying the shadows and outline of furniture from the lights left on in the living room. Coming here had been a horrible mistake and now they'd endangered Dare's family.

She heard the scrape and rustle in the front hall and crawled to the kitchen door and peered around. Dare was checking the locks. He looked over his shoulder and motioned her back to the kitchen, so she crawled to the back door and made sure it was latched. Suddenly, the faint light from the living room was extinguished and the whole house lay in total darkness, like a tomb. She could hear the television in the living room.

"Stay there and keep an eye out the back window, unless you hear something at the back of the house, then come in here with me," Dare said.

"Are we going to try to shoot it out?" she asked. "Maybe we should make a run for it out the back."

"They're out there, too," he said. From her angle and the dim light of a streetlamp she could make out his long frame crouched at the front window.

"Sophia?" Billie asked in panic.

"She made it to Aunt Mitzi's. I provided a little diversion with Mrs. Spasenovski's dog until she got away."

"What was the diversion?"

"Let's just say, we've got one less bad guy to worry about."

A sound on the back stoop drew her attention. Billie checked her gun to be sure it was loaded and moved behind the kitchen table. She didn't call to Dare, fearful she'd give away their element of surprise. And she sure as hell didn't run to the front of the house for him to protect her. He must have had a weak moment to think she would. Instead, she waited, watching the flickering shadows outside the kitchen window. With a suddenness she didn't expect, the glass shattered in the back door and a hulking shadow loomed in the opening as the intruder reached inside to unlock the door.

She fired, heard a grunt of pain and the shadow disappeared.

"Are you all right?" Dare called in a low voice.

"Let's just say we have one less bad guy to worry about," she said tersely. "Don't worry about me. I've got this covered."

Suddenly, shots rang out at the front door. The portal crashed inward and a body crashed to the floor. Someone was inside. Dare held his fire. She waited a moment, then silently crept to the back hallway that ran all the way to the front of the house. In the dark, she couldn't make out anything. She squinted but could see no shape on the hall floor. Whoever had crashed inside was up and moving.

#### Dirty Little Secrets

The door hung open. She could see the lights of the house across the street. For a brief moment the lights vanished, then reappeared as someone passed across her field of vision. She tightened her grip on her gun and held her breath. The lights disappeared again as someone quickly stepped into the hallway. She might have missed that another intruder had entered if she hadn't been watching. She tightened her finger on the trigger and fired. Someone hit the floor, hard. There was no more movement.

From the living room, two shots rang out. She didn't know if Dare had fired or the intruder and she had no time to find out. Shots sent what glass was left in the back door spewing all over the floor. Bullets showered the room, tearing into walls and wood trim and cabinets. Mama Sophia's kitchen was being demolished.

That pissed Billie off.

She rolled back behind the table and waited a heartbeat until the shooting stopped, then got to her feet, gun blazing, the dark shadow outside the now-windowless door her target. Someone grunted and went down. From the front of the house, she heard the screech of tires on pavement. Reinforcements! A fusillade of bullets pounded the front of the house, breaking glass and shattering lamps and figurines in the living room. A blue light flared briefly as a bullet found the television screen.

"Dare," Billie screamed. "Are you all right?"

"Never better," he yelled back. "I'm just finishing this article on *Deadliest Jobs in the Outdoors*."

"You fool," she shouted, biting back a sudden urge to cry and laugh at the same time. The shooting stopped, the last tinkle of broken glass sounded and blue smoke drifted in the air. Suddenly, a body was beside her.

"You know what, Princess?" Dare asked. She jumped then elbowed him with annoyance for not giving her a warning.

"What, you ass?" she grunted.

"I was just thinking it wouldn't be a good idea to spend the night here."

"Why's that?" she asked, peering around the corner of the table at the back door. She had a sense they were about to be rushed. He must have felt it too because he was reloading while he kept up his patter.

"Well, I figure tonight would be a good night for us to...you know. That is if you don't have a headache."

"I never get headaches."

"Yeah, you tell me that now, but after we're married what will it be?"

"Married?" she asked, momentarily diverted from their danger. A scrape of leather on the back stoop drew her attention back to the kitchen door.

"Who says we're getting married?" she grunted under her breath.

Dare squirmed into position beside her. "I figure no one else will have us after all this. We're well suited. You know, like Bonnie and Clyde."

"Thelma and Louise," she offered.

He hesitated. "Well, yeah," he said and fired. Someone outside went down.

"Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," he said as he crawled to the hallway. They waited, silent and tense, listening for the approach of men who meant to kill them.

"This isn't looking too good," she whispered to him.

"Well, yeah," he admitted from his position in the hallway.

"If we don't make it," she began.

"Who says we won't?" he snapped.

"Well, just in case we don't."

"Anything you say at this moment doesn't count," he said, "so button up, Princess."

She bit her lip. He didn't want to hear that she loved him, she thought and fell silent.

"Here they come," he warned. "Be careful, Billie."

"You too."

The shots came from front and back at the same time, a volley of deadly gunfire that further chipped away at Mama's house. They held their fire, waiting until the assault died down. She knew they might need their ammunition later.

Suddenly, the shooting stopped. In the distance sirens could be heard, the sound shrill and as heavenly sounding as a choir of angels.

"Detroit's finest," Dare said. "What do you think of them now?"

"I'll personally kiss the behinds of every single man who's coming," she declared. "And I won't even get mad when I make my next protection payment."

"Ahh, Billie, you're such a cynic," he admonished. The squad cars had drawn to a stop on the street beyond.

"Stop," someone yelled. Gunfire sounded. At the back of the house, running footsteps thudded as the killers scrambled. Tires squealed as they tried to make their getaway and sirens sounded as squad cars gave chase.

Dare stood up cautiously. "Well, Princess, the party's over," he said. "I think it's clear enough for us to go out and talk to the police."

"Wait, Dare. I can't go out there," she said from her position in the corner.

"Why not? We've got the evidence we need to prove you didn't kill Sam Udall."

"What about Helen Savage?"

"We'll find out who did that one too."

"And while you do, where will I be? In jail?"

"No, Billie."

"Once they get me in a jail cell, they'll throw away the key," she said getting to her feet and heading for the back door.

"Where are you going? You can't run away now." He blocked her.

"I'm not going to jail tonight," she said stubbornly.

"What are you going to do? You can't just wander around the streets, Billie. The chase is over. We've won."

"You've won. I haven't. I still have to prove my innocence." She turned toward the door. He caught her hand.

She hesitated. Her time was running out. The police would have the guys outside rounded up and be in here any second.

"I don't have time for this," she said and wrenched her hand away from him. Taking a quick look out the back, she bolted, taking the same direction Sophia had earlier. She paused at the edge of the garage and looked around the corner. The way down the alley looked clear and she started forward.

"Not that way, you'll get caught," he said at her elbow. He took hold of her arm and jerked her in the opposite direction, keeping to the shadows and skirting one yard where a small, annoying dog yipped a warning.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked suspiciously, not willing to admit even to herself how glad she was that he had followed her.

"Well, we need some transportation," he said, "so we're taking the back way to Aunt Mitzi's. Uncle John'll loan me his car and we can get around easier than if we're trying to find cabs and steal cars."

"Okay," she said in a small voice.

He made an exasperated sound and swung her around so her back was pinned to a garage door and a halogen outdoor light cast bluish shadows over their faces.

"Can you tell me, I mean, just the slightest hint would help, why in the hell we aren't talking to the police right now?"

"Because we don't have all the pieces to the puzzle," she said. "All we can prove with the information we have is that I didn't kill Sam, and that your old partner, Boyd, was mixed up in it. But who did the killing? This has been nagging at me all day, ever since we looked at those SD cards. I think I know who killed Helen and maybe Sam Udall."

"Who?" His hold on her shoulders had long since relaxed.

She shook her head. "I need to see those SD cards again to be sure."

"Let's tell the police," he said. "They'll retrieve them."

"Will they?" She looked at him. "Earlier today you were afraid to mail the information you had. What if the same crooked cop you worried about gets to those SD cards first?" He stared at her for a long moment.

"You win," he said finally and taking hold of her hand, headed down the alley at a fast clip. When they got to the last garage on the block, he paused and studied the street. Billie leaned against his back and waited confidently. Dare was with her, that was all that counted. He'd take care of the details and she'd be there in the pinch.

"Darius," she said softly.

"Don't call me Darius," he grunted. "Only my mother does that. Everyone else, I've had to kill." She ignored his outright threat.

"Remember what you said when we were in your mother's house?"

"Of course, I do," he snapped. "Every single solitary thing I uttered. Which single, solitary thing are you referring to?"

"You know, when you told me that anything I said then wouldn't count."

"Yeah, we were in a lot of danger. People say a lot of stuff they don't mean when they think they're going to die."

She hesitated, thinking that over. "Is that what you did when you mentioned marriage?"

"Did I?" He grabbed her hand. "Get ready."

"Darius, we have to talk."

"Not now." She felt him tense up, getting ready to run.

"I need to tell you something. It's really important."

"I don't want to hear it." He still wasn't paying attention to her, his gaze on the street beyond.

"Yes, you do, Darius. You're just scared." That stopped him. His attention was fully on her now. He studied her a long moment and shrugged.

"I just figure we don't need to say something that's as plain as the nose on our faces."

"Such as?" She didn't like his tone, so all-knowing male.

"Oh, say it and be done with it." He was clearly annoyed.

"Well, I'm not going to say anything with you taking that attitude." She put her hands on her hips and scowled at him.

"Look, Princess. I know you're going to say you love me, but you don't have to. You show me every time we make love, just before you reach your climax. Your face gets all red and your eyes kind of bulge out and get that little light in them, all kind of dopey and stupid, so you don't have to say the words."

"That's not what I was going to say," she snapped, mortified by his description. "And that's not the way I look when we're mak—fucking. That's all it is, you know, a good fuck with no extra baggage."

"I must have been mistaken. I'm sorry if I offended you."

"No need to be sorry. You simply said what you thought," she answered coolly then gave away her real irritation by whacking him on the shoulder. "I hope you remember *that* look you so eloquently described because you'll never have the opportunity to see it again."

"Ah, Billie, I didn't mean to –"

#### Dirty Little Secrets

"Hands in plain sight so I can see them." A bright search light hit them in the face. Dare blinked trying to see beyond the glare. While they'd been engaged in their argument, a police car, with its lights off, had sneaked down the alley undetected. Dare felt like a fool to be so caught off guard. Billie tugged at his hand in a desperate attempt to break and run. He hung on to her not wanting her to be shot by some gun-happy rookie.

"I'm Detective Dare Stafanos." He called out.

"I know who you are," a familiar voice answered.

"Howie, is that you?" Dare couldn't believe their good fortune. "Turn off the light, son. It's hurting my eyes."

There was a long hesitation, then the glaring light went out. Dare blinked against the spots that danced before his eyes. Finally, his sight adjusted to the half-illumination cast by a nearby streetlamp.

"Howie, am I glad to see you." He started toward the young cop.

"Stay back. I'll shoot if I have to," Howie said taking a traditional firing stance.

"Howie," Dare chided. "You know me. Billie and I were just trapped in that house back there. Man, am I glad you guys showed up. I thought we were goners. How'd you know to come?"

"Your mother called in a complaint. She said you were there and a bunch of gangsters were trying to kill you." He hadn't relaxed his stance one iota and his pistol didn't waver. His stern gaze was fixed on Billie who had moved up beside Dare.

"Don't move any closer," he said and fumbled at the walkie-talkie on his belt.

"Hey, don't do that, Howie," Dare said. "We need your help here and we don't want any of the other cops involved."

"Why not?" the young officer asked suspiciously. "In fact, why aren't you back there talking to my captain?"

"Look, Howie, we know who's behind all these murders. We just need one more little piece of evidence to prove it. We just need a ride. Could you help us out here, buddy?"

"No way. I'm going by the book this time," Officer Howard said firmly.

"Well, I don't blame you for that," Dare acknowledged. "But going by the book is not going to get you ahead. You don't want to spend the next few years driving a squad car, do you, especially when it's as old as this one?"

Howie hesitated. Finally, with a sigh of frustration he lowered his gun.

"Why should I put my career on the line for you again?" he asked belligerently.

"Because you know it's the right thing to do, Howie. And because you're a rightthinking guy, but more than that, if you help us break this whole thing open, it could be a big promotion for you." "And if we don't break it open, it could be the end of my life as a cop." He'd used the word *we* so Dare knew he had him.

"Don't think like that." He cast a glance over his shoulder. "Listen, we need to get out of here and fast. Let's get moving. We'll explain on the way."

"Wait," Howie said. "I'll take you, but not her. She blew up my last cruiser."

"It was an accident, Howie," Billie said softly. "I promise you I don't have a grenade."

"How do I know that?" he asked petulantly. "What have you got in that bag?"

"You don't want to know," Dare said, grabbing Billie's arm and opening the back door of the cruiser. A smell wafted out to them, so he slammed it shut. "We'll sit in the front." He shoved Billie in and got in himself. Reluctantly, Officer Howard holstered his gun and got in, sitting as close to the door as he could so as not to touch Billie.

"Relax," she said sarcastically. "I'm not going to blow up the car I'm riding in."

"That makes sense," he said and did seem to relax a little as he put the car in gear and pulled out on the street.

"Where are we going?" he asked, looking at Dare.

"Sam Udall's place," Billie answered. Howie started in surprise.

"What do you want there?" He glanced at Dare.

"Hey, I'm starting to feel like the invisible woman here," Billie said. "We're going to Sam Udall's because that's where the evidence is." The police car started to slow as Howie seemed to reconsider his decision.

"She's telling you the truth," Dare said. "I left the evidence there."

"You left evidence at Sam Udall's?"

"Sure. That's where we hid out for a couple days," Dare revealed. "Now would we tell you all this if we weren't on the up and up?"

"So, who's the killer?" Howie persisted. Dare scrambled for something to say, not because he didn't want to level with the kid, but because he wasn't sure himself. Since Howie didn't trust Billie yet, he might not be willing to go along just on her say-so. He was saved from answering by an irate voice coming over the police radio demanding where the hell Officer Howard was.

"Tell him you're chasing a guy that got away," Dare advised and waited while the young officer did so. Howie was a bad liar. He must have known it as well for he was quiet after he signed off.

"I'll drop you off at Sam's place," he said finally. "Then I'll hightail it back to Southgate like the chief said. I'll come back and pick you up later."

"Gee, Howie. We were hoping you'd be there with us."

The young cop cast a look of skepticism that said he didn't believe a word Dare said. But he was good to his word. He delivered them at the front gate and drove off

with a promise to return as soon as he could. Dare and Billie watched his taillights disappear down the street.

"He's a good kid," he observed.

"He doesn't like me much."

"Well, he's right. You did blow up his car."

"I can't undo that now."

Dare took a deep breath. "You know this will make or break us."

"I know. Thanks for believing in me," she said softly and took hold of his arm as they crossed the street.

## **Chapter Twelve**

Sam's place looked as deserted as it had when they left earlier that day, only the timer lights penetrated the gloom of the landscaping. The hulking mass of the brick mansion loomed like a tired cliché in a B horror movie.

"The only thing missing are the hounds," Dare muttered.

"Do you suppose they're still out?" Billie asked. "I put quite a bit of sleeping pills on those steaks." They stood regarding the unlocked gate in the midnight black, loath to enter.

"Everything looks just the way we left it," Dare said cautiously. "But let's not advertise our arrival. Stay low and stay quiet." He adjusted his hold on the flashlight he'd confiscated from Howie's cruiser.

He pushed the gate open only far enough to squeeze through and they quickly made their way to the line of trees that rimmed the driveway. Their progress was slow, since he paused often to study the sweeping lawn and drive. Neither spoke, afraid to roust the hounds that might have recovered from their earlier treat and been let out of their pens by the conscientious caretaker. Only when they were safely inside the fenced pool area did Dare breathe a sigh of relief.

He glanced at Billie with a raised eyebrow and took out his gun, holding it at the ready as they advanced to the pool house. She took out her borrowed pistol and followed him quietly until they were both scrunched on either side of the pool house door. Dare placed a finger to his lips and slowly turned the knob. The door swung inward, revealing the interior they'd come to know as well as their own spaces before they'd become off-limits.

The pool house appeared empty, but they took nothing for granted, taking positions against the walls as their gazes studied the dark shadows. When all seemed clear, they used the servant's route through the small kitchenette at the back of the bar, through the cellar and up the stairs to the main kitchen. Once again, they halted, taking extra precautions before moving forward.

"Looks clear," Billie said, barely whispering.

"Yeah." Dare nodded reluctantly. Nothing seemed clear anymore. "We'll go directly to the media room, get the cards, then get the hell out of here."

"Sounds good to me."

They scanned the kitchen again then stepped out of the safety of the cellar door. Moving slowly, making a minimum of sound, they crept down the hall to the library. At the door, Dare paused and listened, then motioned her to follow. Quietly, he inched the door open. The room was pitch black and the hairs stood up on the back of his head. "What happened to the night lights that automatically come on at dark? They were working last night," Billie whispered.

He held out a hand to motion her back. Something didn't feel right about all this. He almost sensed someone else's presence.

"What is it?" she whispered so low, he barely heard her query. He held a finger to his lips, then motioned that he would enter first and she was to stay where she was. Giving her no chance to voice her denial, he slipped inside the darkened library and pressed his back against the wood door, waiting for his eyes to adjust. The panel moved behind him and Billie squeezed in next to him. He should have known. He gripped her arm a little harder than necessary just to communicate his displeasure, but she shrugged him away and moved forward.

Faint moonlight shown off the flat surfaces of the desk and small tables and she seemed to be using that as her compass, progressing with far more ease than he would have. Suddenly, there was a sound of someone falling and she cried out.

"Are you all right?" he whispered urgently, straining to see through the darkness. When she didn't answer he flicked on the flashlight. She was nowhere to be seen. "Where are you?"

"Here, behind the desk," she said in a low voice. "I found a body. Oh, no."

"What is it?" He splayed the light over her. She was kneeling beside a body clad in black leather. Dare had a feeling she knew who it was even before she spoke.

"It's Carlos," she said, feeling his pulse. Her shoulders sagged and she looked up at him. "He's dead."

"How'd he die?" He squatted beside her and rolled the body over. The answer was immediately clear. A perfect hole pierced his forehead dead center. His dark eyes stared at them reproachfully.

"Turn off the light," Billie said urgently, looking around. He did as she demanded and they both stayed where they were, listening to the night sounds, to the sighing protests of the old mansion, to the deadly possibilities gathering in the corners. In the distance a hound bayed and Billie shivered.

"Do you think the killer's still here?" she asked finally, her voice low and tight.

"I hope not," he answered fervently. "But we'd better get what we came for and get the hell out of here." Staying low, he moved toward the door behind the desk which led to the media room. He was vaguely aware that Billie was following and longed to tell her to stay where she was, but he couldn't guarantee she'd be any safer with Carlos' dead body than with him. Inside the media room, he crouched, waiting a long time before he finally made his way to the cabinet where he'd stored the leftover SD cards. He shone the light in the drawer and cursed.

"What's wrong?"

"Someone's already been here," he growled in frustration.

"Those bastards," Billie said, her expletive no less intense for being whispered. "They must have followed Carlos here and when he found the cards, they killed him and took them."

"What makes you think Carlos would have known about the cards?" He crouched closer to her so their whispers wouldn't draw attention.

"They knew about Sam's cameras," she said.

"Who's they?"

"Carlos and Helen. Look, do you remember that card where Senator Bodden was having a go at it with another man?"

Dare nodded.

"And someone came into the room but we couldn't see who it was on the tape."

"Yeah, the maid."

"Not a maid. Helen Savage. At first, I didn't recognize her voice. I wasn't watching the little scenario any longer and my thoughts were on something else, but later I remembered. The thing that tipped me was Carlos' voice when he reassured Bodden that he hadn't been seen."

"How can you be sure it was Helen?"

"Because I saw Bodden at Helen's condo two nights ago. They were having a *ménage à trois*. I was drugged down pretty heavily and I-I thought Bodden was you."

"Me?" Dare hesitated. "We don't look anything alike. I'm better looking and certainly younger. And –"

"Oh, get over yourself. Remember I was drugged."

"So what are you getting at?"

"Don't you see?" Billie whispered, gripping his arm. "Bodden is a closet homosexual which doesn't look so good when you're making a bid for the governorship, even with today's enlightened attitudes. If that information got out, his career would be ended, not to mention his prestigious marriage to an heiress to one of Corporate America's wealthiest and most powerful fortunes. There goes his main support base.

"Then there are his children off at their high-status colleges. Can you imagine what the scandal would do to them and their futures? No, Bodden wasn't ready for the fallout if his secret were to be discovered. So, here he is at Udall's mansion where he's assured of privacy, so he can indulge in his little side life, but a woman enters the room and sees him. He can't take a chance she recognized him, but what can he do?

"That's where Carlos comes in. He tells Bodden he knows the woman and he can ensure Bodden's secret is safe with her. In fact, Helen is a wealthy woman who is a friend of Sam's and she'll provide him the same privacy Sam has done. In effect they've stolen Sam's pigeon for their own blackmail scheme."

"But Helen Savage was enormously rich, so why would she engage in such a ploy?"

Billie rolled her eyes at his naivety. "Helen Savage was an evil woman who loved to control people. She would have been out of her mind with joy to know she had the governor under her thumb. Think of the power."

He was silent, digesting all she'd said. "So why would Bodden have gone to her condo and put himself in still more jeopardy?"

"Maybe she forced him? She threatened to tell if he didn't come see her and talk about it? Once there, they drugged him, the way they did me and took more films?" She shrugged.

"And tell me how does all this tie in with Udall?"

"We know Sam had his own blackmail agenda and tried to spring it on Bodden and the Senator hired an assassin to kill him. Then he had Helen killed and he must have had Carlos killed as well. That's the only way it works out. He had to wipe out anyone who knew his secret."

"And Charlie and his guys?"

"They arrived after Bodden's assassin killed Sam. They found me in the mansion and thought I was the killer. They weren't trying to remove me as a witness, they were trying to kill me in retaliation."

"Umm, okay, it sounds plausible," he said reluctantly. They remained where they were, huddled in the corner of the media room, sorting things through their minds.

"So how do we prove all this without the SD cards?"

"We can't. All the other witnesses have been killed. I'm the only one left. I saw Bodden in Helen's penthouse. I'm the only one who can still identify him. After that he's free and clear."

"There's me," Dare said. "He'll have to kill me too."

"He doesn't really know about you," she said softly. "You said the guy who came to your apartment was one of Sweet's men."

"Yeah, I recognized him as one of the guys who chased us through Cobo Hall."

"Then Bodden must not know about you," she said urgently. "And we have to keep it that way, because if I'm killed, only you would be left to know what really happened and make things right."

Her logic left him speechless. He'd never known a woman who was braver.

"They're not going to kill you," he whispered, snatching her close. "Only over my dead body."

"Don't say that," she murmured against his shoulder. Her arms tightened convulsively around him.

"Billie?"

"What?"

"Tell me what you were going to say back there in Mama's kitchen."

"I can't remember," she said, turning her head away from him.

"I want to hear it." He waited but she said nothing. "Then I'll be the one to say it." A loud sound came from the other room, the bump of a large piece of furniture falling over.

"Get down," he said, pushing her to the floor. He sprawled beside her, his gun cocked and ready. They waited. The sound of someone moving around in the other room could be heard but no evidence the intruder was coming after them.

"I'm going to check this out," he whispered, getting off the floor and settling into a low crouch.

"No, you'll be shot like Carlos," she protested, but he moved away from her, headed for the open door to the library. Just as he straightened and was ready to make his move, a light flared as the overhead chandelier was turned on and a pale-faced Officer Howard stood blinking owlishly.

"Turn that light off and get down," Dare roared.

Howard looked confused, then shocked, when his gaze fell on Carlos' body sticking out from behind the desk.

"What's going on here?" he demanded starting across the room. Dare did a linebacker tackle from his high school days, hitting the young officer in his solar plexus and bearing him down to the floor just as glass from the multi-paned French door exploded inward.

"Dare," Billie called from the media room. She could barely be heard over the sound of gunfire.

"We're okay. Stay down," Dare yelled. He looked at the young officer who had taken refuge behind the desk and rolled into a ball. There was a lull in the shooting and Billie crawled on her knees and elbows toward them.

"We've got to get out of here," she said. "We can't get trapped in the media room. There's no way out."

"Back out the way we came," he said and glanced at the young officer. Howie's hair stuck out like he'd had an electrical shock and his eyes were round with shock, but he nodded gamely that he was with them. Dodging glass and splinters of wood being kicked up by the renewed firing, they made their way to the dark entrance hall.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Dare said, scrambling to his feet. They retreated to the back of the house, while behind them the sound of someone crashing through French doors could be heard. In the kitchen, they headed for the pantry and the cellar steps, scrambling down them two at a time. In the pool house they hesitated before opening the doors and darting outside. They found places to hide in the bushes and waited. Dare peered out at the police cruiser parked near the front entrance.

"Jesus Christ, Howie, you drove right up the driveway and parked in front. You might as well have advertised your arrival."

"I figured there wasn't a problem since you guys were in there," he said.

"How'd you get in?"

"The front door was just standing open. I thought you guys must have gone in that way." He hesitated then said in a hurt tone, "I decided I'd better come back in case you needed me."

"That was sweet of you, Howie," Billie said. "They thought we'd come through the front door and they were making it easy for us. It was a setup. They were waiting to kill us."

"That's probably what Carlos did, just wandered in," Dare said from his watch point.

"And they killed him because they thought he was with me?" she asked.

"Who's Carlos?" Howard asked.

"It's a long story, Howie. There's no time to explain now."

The radio on his belt squawked.

"Jesus, turn that off. It'll give us away," Dare whispered.

"Too late, it already did," Billie said and leveled her gun.

"Don't shoot," Dare whispered. "They have more fire power than we do, we'd never survive. Besides I'm tired of getting shot at. Let's just get the hell out of here."

"How? We're trapped inside this pool area." Howie looked around frantically. He had his pistol out.

Billie was looking around for an escape. "There's a gate in back for the pool boy." Without waiting for the others, she took off.

Dare cast a quick glance at Howie. "Ain't she something?" He hurried after her and Howie followed. The gate opened onto a long service drive that must have led down to the street, but Billie was aiming for a wooded stand that angled down toward the riverbank. There was nothing for them to do but follow. Once they reached the black shadows of trees and brush, they paused.

"Use that squawk box and call for reinforcements," Dare ordered. He'd taken up a stand behind one of the broad oak trees, gazing back the way they'd come. They could hear the gunmen up at the mansion searching the grounds and pool area. One of them came out the back gate and walked down the tarmac, peering toward the line of trees then down at the street obviously debating which way they'd run. Eventually, seeing no sign of them, he turned and retraced his steps back to the mansion. Howard headed down the riverbank some distance and spoke urgently into his walkie-talkie.

"We've got to keep these guys from getting away before the police get here," Dare said to Billie. "Think you're up to it?"

"Let's make our way around to the pens and let the dogs loose on them. That'll keep them busy for a while."

"Sounds like a plan. Since we're letting the dogs loose, we'd better get Howie." He let out a low, short whistle and the young policeman scrambled back up the bank.

"We've got backup coming," he said.

They kept to the riverbank to make their way across the acre-wide lawn to the other side where the dog pens resided. The hounds recognized them and trotted over to snarl at them.

"Some gratitude here, pals. Don't you remember us? We're the ones who gave you those luscious t-bones earlier. You cooperate with us and we'll see you get steaks for the rest of your lives. We might even put in a good word for a career change for you." The Doberman pinschers stopped snarling and looked at him with heads cocked as if considering his proposition.

"You two head out that back gate to the street," Dare instructed. "I'll let them out."

"Be careful," Billie called over her shoulder. She was tired as hell of being chased by these four-legged monsters. Once she and Howie were safe, she turned back to watch as Dare opened the pens then made a run for the fence. The dogs remained where they were. One of them yawned and the other lay down and started gnawing on a leftover steak bone.

"Hey, come on, guys. You've got to earn your keep," he urged them.

In the distance came the wail of sirens. Dare looked at Howie and did a thumbs-up. The sound galvanized the dogs into action. They hit the opening of their pens as if the starting bell of a long distance race had sounded. Mouths slavering, low vicious growls resonating in their chests, eyes rolling in doggy madness, they sprinted toward the front drive.

"Let's go." Dare ran after them.

"Are you nuts?" Billie called after him. Howie, his gun at the ready, was following unquestioningly.

"You're both fools," Billie muttered and trotted after them. She gripped her gun tightly. She wasn't one for shooting innocent dogs, but if these monsters were innocent, she was Snow White. If either one of them turned on her or Dare or Howie, she was going to blast away. She rounded the corner of the house just in time to see the Dobermans disappear through the damaged French doors. Dare and Howie had taken cover behind a couple of large urns sporting spiral-trimmed firs. Dare signaled her to take cover.

Right! Should she crawl on top of the police cruiser to avoid the hounds of hell or hide behind it in case the killers came out firing? She chose the latter. If the dogs came out, she could always scramble inside the cruiser. She'd be a sitting duck, but she'd rather die from a bullet than be torn to shreds by the Baskerville duo.

Through the open double doors, she glimpsed brown furry bodies pacing from one room to another. Suddenly, a man yelled, a shot sounded, a dog yelped in pain then a furious din followed as man and dog engaged in battle. The police sirens had drawn closer now and Howie darted into his cruiser and turned on his lights and siren. At the same time, he got back on his radio. Billie could hear him screaming instructions to come in the gates. A couple of cruisers rocketed up the sweeping drive and came to a shuddering halt just inches from Howie's cruiser.

The hounds, drawn by the noise and flashing lights, appeared in the open doorway. One of them was limping, but that didn't seem to hold him back as he joined his partner in crime. They leaped from the front stoop and angled toward Howie still seated in his cruiser with the door open. The young cop saw them coming and threw himself across the seat and out the passenger door which he closed behind him. Dare slammed the driver's door shut, effectively closing the hounds in the cruiser. The newly arrived policemen hadn't a clue how close they'd come to being greeted by the canine terrors. Guns drawn, they rushed into the mansion.

The Doberman pinschers howled their rage at being trapped inside the car and clawed at the closed windows. Billie came out of hiding and joined Dare, watching the dogs as they began devouring the upholstery.

"That took care of them," Howie said coming around the cruiser, his face flushed with pride.

"Looks like you're going to need a new car," Dare observed, nodding toward the raging dogs.

"Motherfuckers, my car," Howie cried, hand to his forehead as he surveyed the damage. Wide-eyed, he glanced around at Dare and Billie.

"Don't look at me," she said. "I had nothing to do with this."

The police ushered out two handcuffed men in pinstripe suits who looked like they belonged to the Secret Service. One of them was bleeding and had bite marks all over his cheek, neck and hands. He was cursing and glared at the yapping dogs shut in the police cruiser.

"Shut up," the other yelled at them in a low, furious voice. Billie recognized him as the one who had searched when they were hidden in the linen closet. He looked just as mean and dangerous now as he had then.

"Good job, Officer Howard." A policeman wearing captain's stripes on his uniform came to greet them. When he saw Billie, he turned to one of his men.

"Someone get some handcuffs on this woman here," he ordered. Dare stepped forward.

"She's not one of your criminals, Captain," he said forcibly.

The officer shook his head. "We have a warrant out for her arrest, Detective, and we're taking her in."

Billie took a step back, wondering if she could outrun them. Her frantic gaze fell on Howie who shook his head slightly then swiveled his eyes toward his cruiser.

"I've got some handcuffs right here, sir," he said and threw open his car door. Two pissed-off, plastic-and-foam surfeited animals left off their demolition of the cruiser and leaped out the door, the front paws of one landing squarely on the chest of the captain who was shoved to the ground.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir," Howie said rushing forward to rescue his captain. "The keys are in the ignition," he said in a low voice as he swept past Billie. She didn't need a second invitation. She hopped in the cruiser, fumbling for the keys when Dare slid in beside her. Ignoring dog slaverings and bits of foam, she scooted over to make room for him. Dare floored the gas pedal and they were halfway across the lawn headed for the gated pool and the service drive beyond before anyone reacted.

Billie watched out the back window as Howie leaped up and drew his gun.

"Halt!" he shouted, took aim at something far above their heads and fired. The bullet came nowhere near them. By this time, other policemen had drawn their guns and commenced firing. The back window of the car exploded.

"Here we go again," Billie said, raising her pistol.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

"Don't return fire," Dare ordered.

"What do you mean, don't return fire?" she asked, staring at him incredulously.

"Billie, I've nearly got us out of here. The street's just ahead. There's no need to return fire. If you kill a policeman, I'll never be able to save your ass."

"Well, who asked you—" Without finishing her sentence, she lowered her gun and just stared at him. Dare was looking for a future for them, she realized. She had to do what he said.

"Now what do we do?" she asked.

"Well, we've got to find those cards," Dare said, "and I think I know where they are."

"You do?"

"Yeah, when we were at Mama's house, I was watching the news on Channel 8 and they were telling about a political fundraising dinner at the Ren-Cen."

"You were watching television when those guys were shooting at us?"

"Well, they hadn't really started yet and I just happened to glance at the screen and guess who I saw there?"

"Is this relevant?" Billie looked at him.

"Yeah, Princess, this is. I saw my old pal, Phillip Merkel and State Senator Richard Bodden. At first, I didn't get what was happening. It looked like Merkel was Bodden's bodyguard, but then he went up to the Senator and whispered something in his ear and handed him something, something that made Bodden very happy, because he smiled and slipped whatever it was into his pocket."

"The cards," Billie said.

"The cards!" Dare grinned. Sirens sounded behind them.

"Uh-oh!" He flicked on his siren and increased his speed. Billie divided her time during that harrowing ride downtown between anxiously looking out the back window at the flashing lights gaining on them and cowering in the front seat as Dare wove his way through downtown traffic.

"You aren't worried, are you, Princess?" he asked, glancing at her.

"Don't give me a thought," she said quickly. "I've gotten used to your driving."

"That's a good thing to know about you, Billie. I hate backseat drivers and to know for a certainty that I don't have to contend with that for the rest of our lives together is reassuring."

In answer, Billie screamed. Nonchalantly, Dare twisted the wheel, barely missing a limousine which had pulled out onto Jefferson when the light turned green.

Suddenly, they were there. The Renaissance towered over the surrounding buildings, all glass and steel and brilliant lights, with people milling about. Dare wheeled the police cruiser as close as he could and they got out, running for the front entrance. Other police cruisers squealed to a stop and policemen spilled out and raced after them.

"Stop them," one of the cops cried, but they'd reached the door and hurried inside, heading directly for the escalator that took them to the floors above. Dare raced up them, pulling Billie behind him. At the next landing, he looked around. Men and women in formal attire sipped cocktails and chatted, unaware of what was occurring around them.

"Where's the dinner?" Dare yelled and some of the couples looked at him startled, their smiles fading and their eyes darkening with distrust. Little wonder Billie thought, they weren't exactly dressed for this shindig and they both had a frantic look on their faces.

"It's in the West Ballroom, one man finally said pointing down the hall. Without waiting for more, they sprinted toward the convention room. Billie heard a commotion from somewhere behind and guessed the police were close on their tails.

Double doors lay ahead of them. A woman in an evening dress sat at a table covered with a long white linen cloth and place cards.

"Oh, my, you're late," she said, glancing at them, "and you were supposed to dress in formal attire."

"My tuxedo was at the cleaners. I just hate when that happens," Dare said, barely pausing.

"Wait, you can't just barge in there. I have to look up your name. Sir—" The woman's voice faded behind them. Dare had pushed through the door and was rushing into the room, pausing only to search among the tables. Bodden was seated at the head table, chatting with the Mother Theresa of Detroit who managed a large philanthropic organization and who boinked her married lover in one of Sam Udall's guest rooms. She was leaning close to the state senator to relay what must have been a witty comment, because the senator laughed.

Dare ran to the front table and paused in front of them. Their intrusion had finally cut through the pleasant chatter at the tables and the room fell silent. The media had been allowed access to the grand affair and cameras started to whirr.

The senator looked up and his smile faded. His expression grew ugly when he looked at Billie. He glanced around and caught the eye of one of his guards and signaled to him. A tall, muscular man eased himself away from the wall and walked toward them. He bore the same professional air as the two men the police had arrested at Udall's mansion – mean and tough and unstoppable.

"Sir, madam, I'll have to ask you to leave. This is a private affair," the guard said in a voice that was a threat in itself.

Dare laughed. "Now, that's kind of interesting that you'd use those terms," he said shaking off the man's grip on his arm. The bodyguard took a couple of quick steps and tried to pin Dare's arm behind his back, but again Dare eluded him. By this time another man had started across the room and Bodden had risen from his seat and was sidling away from the table.

"Dare, he's getting away," Billie cried and raced across the room toward the Senator. When Bodden saw her, he started a half run toward the exit door, but she got there ahead of him.

"No, you don't, Senator, we have some questions for you." A cameraman moved closer, his camera aimed at them, his bright lights throwing them in startling relief just as Bodden doubled up his fist and socked Billie. She fell back against the wall, half dazed. For a moment the whole room seemed to hold its breath as Billie shook her head and got her balance. Then slowly and deliberately, she stepped forward and swung. Her fist connected with the Senator's nose which spewed blood. Bodden went down landing heavily on his seat, while the people close by drew away in alarm. Lying on the floor, Bodden tried to stem the blood flow with a snow-white handkerchief, his dark eyes nearly red with hatred and rage. He sprang to his feet and headed for the next exit while the crowd parted like the Red Sea.

"Stop him," Billie cried, but no one seemed inclined to intervene. She glanced at Dare who was still battling the two security guards. There was no one to do this but her, she thought and took a flying leap at the departing statesman. She landed high on his back, her legs wrapped around his middle, her hands gripping his thinning hair. She rode him to the floor. Lights flashed, cameras whirled as the news media got the story of the year.

Cries of dismay sounded, men shouted. Vaguely, she realized she was attacking a political official and might be in danger of being shot as an assassin, but the fact she was a woman seemed not to worry the onlookers as much as it would have if she'd been a man.

She lay on the floor, pinning Bodden's legs so he couldn't move while across the room, Dare settled accounts with the security guards. She saw him give one of them a hard sock to the solar plexus which doubled the man over, then he leaped around the other like a quarterback, making a magic run for a touchdown.

"Billie," he shouted. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she cried. "I've got Bodden, not to worry."

By that time, complete pandemonium had broken out in the room as the pursuing police, Howie at the front, arrived in the ballroom. Men tried to block Dare from reaching Billie and the senator, fearing he *was* an assassin. He struggled against them.

"Let that man go," Howie called with authority and the men released him and stepped back. Howie's captain was right beside him.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"Thank god you're here," Bodden said, struggling to his feet. Billie got up too and stood, ready to tackle him again should he try to run. "This woman attacked me."

The captain's stern gaze fell on Billie and he drew his gun. "I want you to come peaceably," he said, "or I promise, I'll shoot you."

"You've got it all wrong, Captain," Dare said, pushing forward to stand beside Billie. "She's not the one you want. The senator is your killer."

"That's outrageous. I haven't killed anyone," Bodden shouted while people all around the room gasped with shock and edged away from him.

"We have proof, Captain," Billie said. "He has it in his pocket."

"Wait, wait," the captain said in response to the next wave of noise. "Just quiet down, everyone." He paused and looked at Billie. "Do you know what you're saying?"

"He has it, Captain," Dare said. "All the proof you'll need to show he's the killer. Search him."

"You can't search this man," Phil Merkel stepped into the group. "He's a state senator and you'll need a search warrant." The room went quiet as everyone considered what he'd said. Billie glanced at Dare. If Bodden left this hall with those cards, he'd destroy them. They'd never be found again and their chance to prove their accusations would be gone. Billie's lips tightened in anger.

"So you need a search warrant for this scumbag," she said. "Well, *I* don't." Turning, she grabbed the pocket on each side of the senator's expensive suit coat. One quick yank downward and the rich silk split, spilling out the tiny cards that were no bigger than a thumbnail.

"There you are, captain, all the evidence you'll need." Billie smiled. Howie hurried to gather up the cards.

"I'll take those, officer," Merkel said, stepping forward.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Dare said. "They're not going out of my sight until they're taken downtown and viewed." He glared at Merkel.

"You have no authority here, Stefanos. Stand down," Merkel ordered.

"No, but I have authority," the captain said. He glared at the assembled people. In the meantime, Howie had quietly slipped the SD cards into his pocket.

"This is outrageous," Bodden cried trying to assume a mantle of injured innocence. "These people have assaulted me and I demand you get me to my car immediately. Otherwise, I'll have your badge for this. You'll be back to walking the beat."

The captain's face flushed red. "You might, at that, Senator, but I'm taking you downtown until I find out what's going on here."

"Where are my security guards?" Bodden demanded, looking around. No one came forward to claim the title. Billie glanced at Dare who smiled and gave a thumbs-up.

#### Dirty Little Secrets

Billie grinned back and never made a demur as a policeman stepped forward and clipped handcuffs around her wrists. Howie lifted one shoulder and turned the corners of his mouth down in an unspoken apology. In the chaos that followed, the police finally restored order. As promised, Bodden and his bodyguards were escorted downtown. Merkel edged away, but Dare was quick to point him out to the captain who assigned a couple of officers to ride with the detective to the station.

\* \* \* \* \*

The night was long, the story longer. There were denials. High-priced lawyers were called who declared the senator had no comment to make at this time, but once the video was played, and everything was sorted out, Bodden was held.

Boyd and Sweet had been arrested at the shootout at Sophia's house. After defiantly refusing to cooperate in the beginning, Boyd cracked and began to reveal everything he knew about Sweet's operations. He'd also implicated Phil Merkel. Sweet finally implicated Bodden in what he knew about Sam Udall's death, although he remained obstinately silent about Udall's criminal activity. A smart move, Billie figured, since that would mean Sweet would be incriminating himself.

The sun was streaking the horizon as Billie and Dare headed home in Howie's chewed-up cruiser. She'd been released into his custody with the promise she wouldn't leave the city and she was feeling blissful that all had turned out as it should.

"What did the chief have to say?" she asked. "Did Boyd clear you?"

"Yeah, the son of a bitch spilled everything. The chief said I'll be reinstated with an adjustment on my back pay. That should be a nice little chunk of change."

"That's wonderful," Billie said enthusiastically. "Wasn't Howie terrific last night? He really came through when we needed him."

"Yeah, I recommended he be transferred into Homicide."

"Good for you, Dare."

"It's not a for sure thing yet. The chief said he'd take it under advisement. He's short a couple of guys right now. He asked how I'd feel about having Howie as my new partner."

Billie sighed and hugged his arm. "So all's well that ends well."

"It looks that way." He drove in silence for a few minutes. "I just see one problem. We can't go back to my apartment. I've got a dead body in the middle of my living room. I'll call them first thing this morning to come pick him up."

"At the sake of sounding picky, I don't want to spend time with a dead man, especially one who tried to kill us," she said.

"Looks like we have the same old problem we've always had," Dare observed.

"Where can we go?" Billie yawned. She couldn't remember being this tired ever in her whole life.

"We could go to Mama's. Things would be a bit shot up, but my old attic bedroom should be okay."

"Funny," Billie said. "We've got nearly a million dollars in cash and no place to stay."

"A m-million dollars?" Dare stared at her in disbelief.

"Not counting the insurance money for my burned building," she said.

"You had insurance?"

"Of course. It wouldn't be good business not to have insured it and I am a good business woman."

"Uh, Billie, about your business." He paused while she waited. "You aren't planning on continuing it, are you?"

"Partly," she responded, looking at her broken fingernails in great concentration. Dare nearly veered off the road.

"What do you mean by partly?" His tone said he was almost afraid to ask.

"Well, you know, I am a Certified Public Accountant and before I got burned out, I had a successful, legitimate business. I'd like to continue that." She grinned at him impishly.

Dare finally closed his gaping mouth and drove a few blocks in silence. "Brains and beauty," he muttered under his breath. "What a combination."

"It's always worked for me." She didn't try to keep the smugness out of her voice.

"Are you going to miss it?"

"Not as much as I'd miss you," she replied. They rode in companionable silence.

"I still can't get used to the fact that you have that much money. Apparently, crime does pay."

"Yes, but it has its pitfalls as well." She looked at him. "Is this going to be a problem?"

"The only problem I have at the moment is where we are going to stay," he said, gripping the steering wheel.

"I opt for Sophia's," she said, leaning against his shoulder and giving in to the fatigue that had plagued her for the past two days.

"Uh, Princess," Dare said hesitantly. "Uh, you know how you scream when you, uh, you know, when you come?"

"Mmmm? You make a lot of noise too, you know."

"Well, if Mama comes home and hears us, she'll think that I'm...mmm..."

"Beating me up?"

"No, she'll know I'm not doing that."

"Fucking?"

"Yeah, although Mama would never say that word."

"Neither will I," Billie said dreamily. "I can do this, Darius. I can be a wife you'll be proud of."

"I know you can, Princess. I'm not worried about you. It's just that –"

"What?"

"I'm not sure I can."

Billie sat up and looked at him. "Do you mean you're getting cold feet?" she asked softly.

"Yeah, I guess so." The words hurt more than she could have imagined. He was joking. He had to be. Dare loved to joke and wisecrack. That's what this was, but his expression was serious, adamant. Suddenly, he turned the wheel and pulled into a parking lot of a hotel.

"Is this okay?" he asked, opening the car door and getting out. "I'll just be a minute."

What was he doing, she wondered. Of course, it was very clear. She'd been released into Dare's recognizance. He was responsible for her until the police finished with all their investigation. Clearly, he'd take her to a hotel to keep her safe and available. He'd tell her the rest of it when he came back.

She looked at the building with the green sign. She'd never been dumped in a Holiday Inn before. Hell, she'd never been dumped before. She'd always run out before she could feel or want anything from a guy but sex. This was different.

She sat lost in thought. She could just leave. She didn't have to sit here in this chewed-up cop car like a cowed little lamb waiting for the slaughter. She could get out and leave, leave Detroit, never see Darius Stefanos again. Her hand curled around the door handle, but she slumped in her seat. She wouldn't run away this time, she realized. She'd stay and play it straight with Dare. He'd saved her life, he'd made love to her, he'd been a friend and so much more. In the total scheme of things, she guessed she owed him that.

He was back, his presence in the car overwhelming and exciting. "Got a room," he said and pulled the car into a permanent parking place.

"Look, Dare," she began.

"Let's go. I'm beat," he said before she could continue. He led her inside and to an elevator. He punched the button and looked at her with eyes that were dark and moist and would melt an Arctic iceberg in less than a minute. Her heart lurched with hope. They stepped into the elevator and the door slid closed.

"Dare, you have to let me say this. I know I'm bossy, and I always want to do things my way, but I'll let you be the boss some of the time. You just have to tell me when, and -"

"Do you promise?" He asked, his lips curving into a smile. It was an evil grin that made her laugh and made her heart lurch with sheer joy. She studied his lean, handsome face with the crooked scar on one cheek and when her gaze reached his eyes,

all the doubt drained away. The tight band that had been restricting her heartbeat and her breathing and nearly every other bodily function that dealt with preserving life eased. Relief flooded through her but she'd never let him know it. Just for good measure and to show she was no softy, she punched him hard on the shoulder.

"What are we doing here?" she demanded.

"I can't face Mama tonight. There'll be a hundred questions, then a hundred more and she won't let us share a bed because we're not married and if I sneak into your bed in the middle of the night, she'll know, because she knows things like that." He looked at her, a smoldering glance that seared her from head to toe. "I thought it would be nicer if we just stayed here tonight. Then when we're married all proper, we'll spend the night at Mama's, but you'd still have to not scream. Is that okay with you?"

Billie grinned and leaned against him. "Whatever you say, Darius," she answered softly.

"This is what I say," he pulled her against him. "I love you like I never thought it possible to love a woman."

"Like Anthony and Cleopatra?"

"Like Frankie and Johnny." He jerked her against him and settled his gorgeous mouth over hers. His hands went to the buttons on her borrowed blouse. Her own hands were busy with his zipper and his shirt buttons.

When the elevator doors rolled open, they heard a gasp and barely registered other guests were waiting to enter. Dare winked at them.

"It's okay, folks," he said with a big grin. "I'm a homicide detective and this is a dangerous suspect I'm about to interrogate." He swept Billie up in his arms and carried her out of the elevator and down the hall. The guests stood back, some of them chuckling as they realized he was joking.

Billie manipulated the card to open the door to their room while Dare busied himself kissing her ear, throat and any other part of her face he could reach. Inside, he released her legs and let her slide down until they were body to body in an embrace so impassioned, she thought they might be bone to bone. She must have uttered the thought, because he released her and finished undressing her then urged her toward the shower.

"You've made me love showers," he murmured, kissing her neck, while his hands turned on the water and adjusted the temperature.

"You're insatiable," she informed him and stepped under the warm pounding spray. He was right behind her. She'd never seen a man shuck his clothes as fast as Dare could, especially when sex was on his mind.

His hands closed over her breasts, cupping them, rolling the nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. His mouth plundered hers, but she gave as good as she got. They lathered each other, their hands gliding over every inch of smooth skin, while the warm shower splashed around their heads and shoulders. Dare's fingers explored every inch of her, absolutely thorough in his investigation, then he lifted her so her legs wrapped around his waist and he could spread her hot flesh and enter with a cock that was throbbing with need.

They tried to reach optimum pleasure without going over the edge, wanting it to last. Grunting from exertion, sometimes laughing with unexpected delight, they pumped against each other, until Dare's eyes darkened. She knew he was close. He surprised her by lowering her legs so her feet touched the tiled floor. Without bothering to turn off the shower, he opened the door and rushed her out, grabbing a towel which he used to blot water from them both. A flick of the wrist and the bed covers were turned back. He shoved her down.

"I like you best when you're spread-eagled," he said dangerously and landed on top of her, letting his elbows bear his weight, then he took hold of her hands and brought them above her head, while his knee parted her legs. "The best position to keep a woman," he said huskily and kissed her. She laughed.

"Then what were all those other positions you've tried?"

"Those were for fun and experimentation. When you have a good and willing subject, you're bound to try other possibilities." He nibbled her lips.

"Well, you did. I think there are only about ten Kama Sutra positions left that we haven't tried."

"We'll get to them," he reassured her. "Ooph." He looked at her in surprise. She'd distracted him, then neatly flipped him so he was now on the bottom and she was astraddle him, his hands captured on either side. He could best her, just by his sheer strength, but he let her dominate.

"This is the way I like you best," she said with a wicked smile. She rose slightly, impaled herself on his rigid cock and rode him like a world class jockey astride Big Brown going for the Triple Crown.

There was no waiting this time. With strong, insistent strokes she brought him to the edge of an explosion, then she leaned forward so the tips of her breasts brushed against his chest. In such a position, her clitoris rubbed against him bringing her greater pleasure, quickening the rhythm of her body and breathing. She tried to slow her burgeoning orgasm, but his gasps were like an aphrodisiac and she began to emit highpitched whimpers, her body responding to everything that was Dare. His sexy smell, his smooth, hard cock, his dark sexy masculinity. In the end she became lost in a torrent of sensations that couldn't be held in check. Together, they reached the ultimate sexual climax, their screams and moans filling the room. Later, they collapsed in a sweaty, tangled heap and lay struggling to breathe as their heart rates slowed.

"Billie," Dare said a long time later.

"Mmm?" she murmured sleepily.

"I love you."

"I know, Darius. That's what makes this so nice, because I love you too."

### About the Author

Multi-published Temple Hogan loves a good mystery. She lives with her husband, three cats and a naughty Shih Tzu on a Northern lake. Her interests are reading mysteries and romances, action movies, boating, swimming, gardening, painting in acrylics and watercolor, and cooking. She is also published in other genres. Besides a good mystery, she loves pirate stories.

Temple spends her mornings writing, with her dog, Gizz, and indoor cat, Squee, keeping her company. Her afternoons are spent on research and devising new story ideas. Amazing characters are a good start to any story, followed by plot. Temple enjoys adding humor to the dangerous circumstances her characters must face and throwing in plot twists to stymie the reader. When she isn't plotting or doing research she joins friends for lunch and antique hunting.

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

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