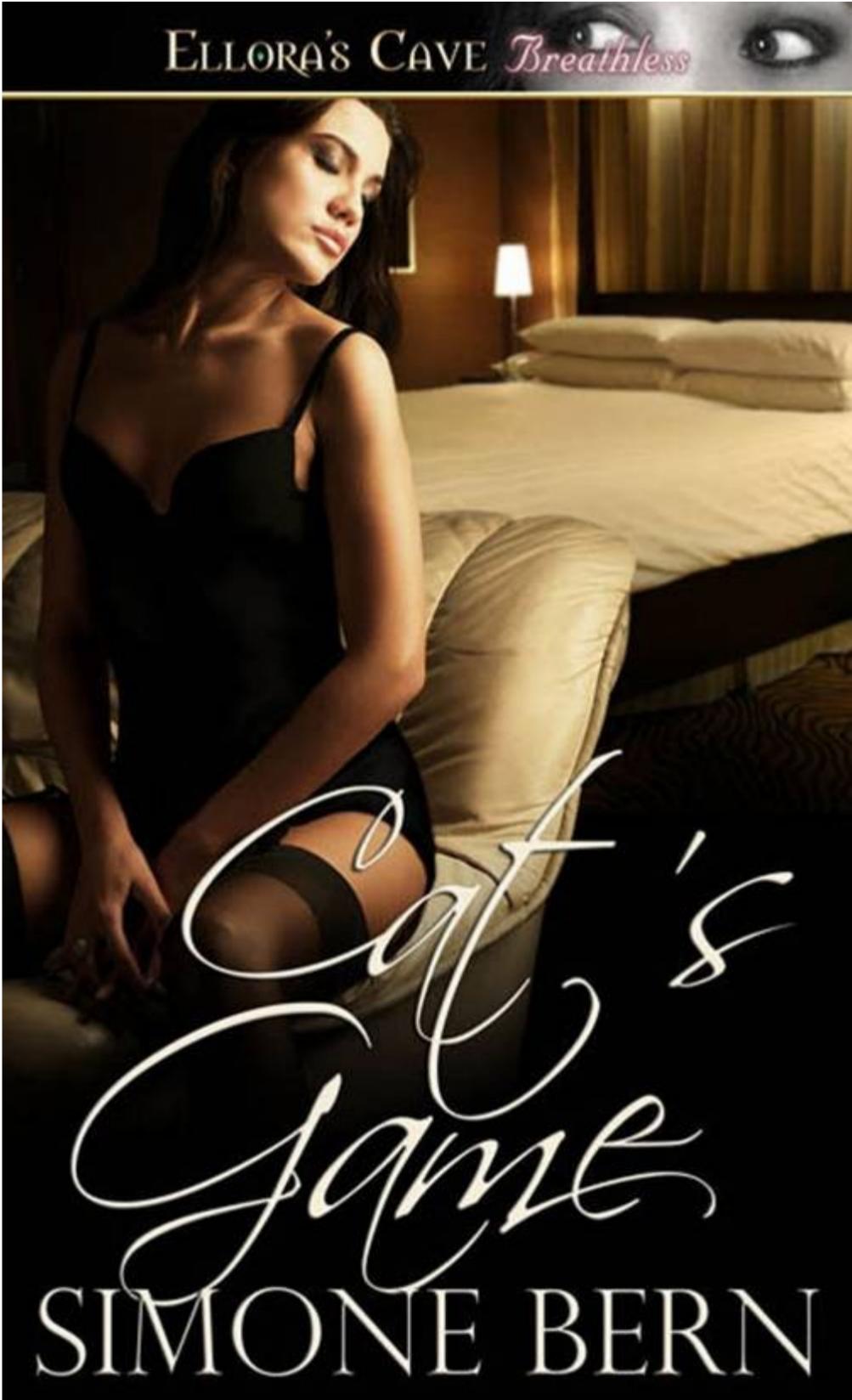


ELLORA'S CAVE *Breathless*



*Cat's
Game*
SIMONE BERN

Cat's Game

Simone Bern

A powerful man with a dangerous secret, a beautiful woman desperate to steal what he's hiding...

The game begins when Jan breaks into Marcus Damon's New York hotel room and ends up with both more and less than she'd planned. Marcus, the brilliant scientist and ruthless businessman behind Damon Laboratories, pulls her into a raw sexual encounter that leaves her physically satisfied but without the data she's been hired to steal. After passion turns to intimacy and then betrayal, the game becomes more dangerous than either player expected.

When two predators play cat and mouse, they both lose...or they both win.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Cat's Game

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CAT'S GAME

Simone Bern

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Jaguar: Jaguar Cars Limited Corporation

Jeep: DaimlerChrysler

Rolex: Rolex Watch U.S.A., Inc.

Chapter One

Jan Connolly undid her climbing harness and placed it carefully on the balcony floor so it wouldn't jingle. The line was still connected to the railing in case she needed to get away quickly. She was always careful about little things like that. It was what made her so good at what she did. Jan straightened up and waited, letting her breathing settle as she watched the lights of the vehicles moving on the streets far below. Even at four in the morning New York was a hive of activity. Finally, assured of her own calm and the deep rumbling snores coming from the room behind her, she popped out the sliding glass door and moved it aside. Slipping into the room, Jan scanned quickly for obstacles.

She drifted past the bed like a shadow, stepping over a rumpled towel on the floor and skirting easily around the open TV cabinet door. The prize must be in the other room. Jan spotted the folded laptop on the dining table immediately, even in the near dark. She opened the laptop and winced when it gave a faint beep as it surged back to life. Quickly she accessed the controls and turned off the volume. Taking a memory stick out of the back pocket of her black pants, she inserted it and began to type commands. The machine hummed as it churned through the hard drive, seeking and copying the presentation and related materials that had been scheduled to be delivered at the conference five days ago but then pulled. If her overly curious clients were willing to pay good money to see an incomplete academic paper on gene therapy, she was more than happy to deliver.

Jan slowly surveyed the large hotel suite in the dim light given off by the tall office tower next door. It was furnished with a large sofa, two armchairs and a massive entertainment cabinet. The dining table could seat six and the kitchen was compact but complete. Very nice digs, especially in this city where a broom closet could put you

back several hundred dollars for the night. The computer settled into a quieter hum and, grinning, she pulled the memory stick back out. Less than ten minutes and she'd snarfed the documents. This mark was far too easy. The fool obviously believed that thirty stories and a pair of bully boys in the hallway provided adequate security. The data was probably encrypted but she could deal with that at her leisure when she got it home.

Jan hesitated by the bedroom door but, reassured by the continuing snores, she ventured closer to the bed. She had been watching this man from a distance for four days, trailing him from breakfast to bedtime. She couldn't help but be intrigued by his tall, powerful figure and appreciated the opportunity for a closer inspection. He might be a fool but he was an attractive fool. His face managed to hold a lean, hard look even in sleep when the tousled dark curls softened his wide brow and strong nose. The white sheet had slipped down and she could admire his muscular arms and bare chest. The curve of one hip peeked out from under the blanket and a dusting of dark curls reached up toward his bellybutton.

Jan licked her lips, imagining her mouth pressed against that sensitive spot. She wondered if he would moan out loud if she were to blaze a trail of hot, wet kisses down his belly and along the edge of that barely decent sheet. With a small shrug of regret she scanned his half-naked form one last time. Marcus Damon looked, smelled and probably tasted perfectly delicious, but he was a mark and it was time for her to disappear.

She stepped away from the bed and suddenly her wrist was captured by an iron grip. There wasn't even time for a muffled yelp before she was sent flying onto the mattress. The next thing she knew Marcus Damon's dark eyes were boring down into hers, his large frame pinning her to the bed. Having been caught in the middle of a lusty daydream about the very body that now lay on top of her, Jan was too off balance to even fight. His right hand came up, grabbed her chin and turned her face into the faint light coming through the open patio door.

"It seems I have a little black kitten prowling around in my room." His lips quirked up into a small smile. "A very pretty little kitten."

She scowled up at him and tried to squirm away from his weight, pushing up at him with her free hand. A kitten! Of all things to call her. At thirty-three Jan considered herself well past the kitten stage. The squirming only seemed to amuse him. He brushed strands of errant long, dark hair away from her face.

"Now, what might you be wanting...here...in the middle of the night?"

Jan switched tactics. Her bunched muscles softened and she melted against him. The arm that had been trying to push him away snaked around his shoulder and began to stroke his back.

"Why, you, of course," she murmured in her most sultry voice.

"Don't you think a black negligee would have been more appropriate attire for a seduction than this?" He ran a hand over her black turtleneck. "But perhaps you're wearing something more attractive underneath?" He tugged her shirt up and smiled as her lacy black bra came into view. "Ah, yes, that's better." A big hand began to knead her breast.

Jan gasped as a surge of wet heat hit her crotch. She was a damn idiot for letting herself respond but Marcus Damon was exactly the sort of man she was attracted to—lean, muscular, not too pretty and arrogant as all hell. His predatory smile intensified at her involuntary gasp. He bent his head and took possession of her mouth. The kiss was as rough as his handling of her body and clearly meant to be a punishment. A demanding tongue forced its way between her partially opened lips and he invaded her mouth, taking possession.

Jan responded by softening even further, welcoming his angry invasion. She buried a hand in his curls and lifted her hips. Slowly she rubbed against the growing bulge at his groin with deliberate provocation. Dexterous fingers had freed one of her nipples from the bra and now he squeezed hard enough to make her whimper. She forced him out of her mouth and bit his lip, not enough to draw blood but making sure it would

hurt. He growled and began to gnaw at her lips like a hungry wolf. They fought with darting tongues and nipping teeth. It was many glorious minutes later when he pulled away from the kiss.

She smiled sweetly up at his glaring face, knowing she had turned the tables on him and swamped his anger with an unexpected lust. His naked body, still anchoring hers in place on the bed, revealed exactly how aroused he was at that moment.

"Why don't you tell me why you're really here?" he demanded but his voice was husky rather than harsh.

"I've been watching you at the biotech conference. Although I'm sure you never noticed me." Jan gave a theatrical little sigh. She'd made damn sure he wouldn't notice her, although it had been very tempting to catch his gaze. "Today, when you declined a dinner invitation from a beautiful blonde, I was so curious I just had to follow you." She cast her eyes down and stroked his arm lightly. When she looked back up at him every ounce of forced awe she could muster was shining from her eyes. "You turned down a hot date in order to have dinner with the ugliest old woman in New York."

Marcus stiffened and a scowl fixed on his face. "Dr. Andreas is a brilliant scientist and the best teacher I ever had."

"That's just it. You honor her, even after all your success. She is more important to you than some panting female fan." Jan played it up to the max. Not that she hadn't been surprised and even impressed by his choice earlier that evening. "Oh Marcus, I fell in love with you that very instant. It gave me the courage to sneak in here while you slept."

"Bullshit," he snapped.

Jan chuckled. She hadn't expected him to buy that lame story but it had been fun to try. "Oh, all right. Your girlfriend sent me to gather evidence that you've been cheating on her."

He snorted. "I don't have a girlfriend. Try again."

Jan hid her smile at the personal information and gave a tiny shrug. "Truth then. I came to rob you. Stupid of me to get caught while eying that Rolex on your wrist."

"So it was my watch you were staring at?" he asked, wry amusement in his tone. "Do designer watches normally make you so hot you're practically slipping out of your pants?"

"Definitely, when I know I can get a couple grand for it."

"So money makes you hot?" His hand slid down to her waistband and undid the zipper of her black pants. He wedged his way under her panties and she felt long fingers press against her vagina, teasing the lips apart. "Because I have lots of money."

"Oh yeah, very hot," Jan agreed and moaned with pleasure as his fingers sank into her cunt.

She was wet and slick and just dying for another kiss to go with the finger-fucking he was giving her. She pressed herself up against his hand. Marcus obliged by rubbing harder on her swollen clit. It was risky to enjoy his attention this much but damn, it felt good. His gorgeous naked body pressing down on her, his hand inside her panties, the dark, burning eyes, it all filled her with a desire so intense it was almost frightening. When his mouth descended on a bared nipple and gave a hard suck, all the bunched-up tension in her body burst into a small, tight climax.

Even before the orgasm peaked she was in motion. Her hand twisted in his hair and yanked his head back just as her knee rammed into his belly. Free from his weight, she scrambled off the bed and dove for the balcony.

Jan was fast but Marcus was faster. He caught her around the waist and they thudded onto the floor before she could reach the open glass door.

"Oh no, I'm not done with you yet." He pressed her face into the plush carpeting with a firm hand. His lips brushed against her left ear. "Do you know what gets me aroused, little cat?"

She could feel his other hand worming her pants down off her hips.

"Silk lingerie and five-hundred-dollar stilettos?" she shot back at him.

Marcus chuckled. "Nice. But what really turns me on is danger." He had succeeded in lowering her pants enough to squeeze the cheeks of one bare buttock. "Risk makes my blood pump. And a dangerous woman can get me as hard as a mountain."

Her pants were now below her knees and he forced her legs apart until he could fit himself between her thighs. She could feel the bulge of a massive erection against her leg and had to admit his description was very apt.

"I think you're a very dangerous little animal," he growled. "Am I right?"

There was no amusement in his voice but rather a deadly, serious hunger. His cock was probing for the entrance to her pussy and Jan knew that he had every intention of pounding her into the floor. She had never been so frightened by a man, nor so thoroughly aroused, in her life.

He proceeded to fuck her with strong, brutal thrusts that pinned her to the floor. There was pain but also a pleasure so intense that the two blended into an inescapable ecstasy. When she started to tremble and moan he shifted his weight off her back and lifted her hips. Kneeling he could ram into her even harder and she grunted at the new depth of his thrusts. His hands were so tight on her hips that she knew she'd have bruises tomorrow. She didn't care. Being fucked from behind by an angry giant of a man made her feel like a bitch in heat and she was hungry for more. Each time his glorious cock stabbed into her she wanted to die. He was tearing her apart but she never wanted this rapturous agony to end.

When her climax hit it was like hurtling into a brick wall. Jan screamed and blackness engulfed her senses. She distantly heard the door open and heavy footsteps approach then beat a hasty retreat. The security guards had finally clued in that there was someone else in the suite.

Marcus chuckled and gathered her up off the floor. His cock was still firmly planted inside her as he helped her to sit up against his chest. Her pants had entirely disappeared, likely underneath their bodies, so she was half-naked. A heavy arm lay

across her belly and he had hold of her left wrist. Her right arm was pinned against him. Then he surprised her by releasing his hold and tugging off the turtleneck she was still wearing. Before she could take advantage of that release he quickly folded her back into a tight embrace.

"That's much better," he said and reached inside the lacy bra to fondle her breast. "Look," he nodded toward the mirrored closet doors a couple feet to their right, "isn't that sexy?"

Jan surveyed the image. She was perched on his lap, sitting astride his broad thighs with a muscular arm around her waist, locking her in place. He shifted slightly and turned them fully toward the mirrors. Now she could see the bottom of his thick cock as it disappeared up her pussy. He had softened somewhat but still seemed strongly erect. Both her breasts were jutting out over the bra, the straps having fallen from her shoulders. As she watched a big hand tugged and twirled her left nipple, far more gently now than earlier. Her long hair was mussed and sweaty. He must have bitten her bottom lip, it looked swollen and sore. She had to agree that she'd never looked sexier.

"Beautiful Cat," he murmured into her ear. "I wonder how long I can keep you? If I let my arm drop will you run away? Or will you stay and let me fuck you some more?"

It was a good question. She knew what she *should* do. Distract him then jab her fist against his throat hard and fast, grab her clothes and go. Hopefully she'd be over the railing before he regained the ability to summon the guards. It was the reasonable thing to do. But she felt so damn good exactly where she was. Jan wriggled a little and pressed down onto his cock.

He chuckled. "You aren't much for words are you? But the communication is very effective nonetheless. I'll take that to mean you want to keep fucking."

She leaned forward over his arm and lifted herself up along the pillar of his cock then let herself drop down. Marcus gave a deep grunt and she looked in the mirror to see his face. He was staring at their joined bodies with intense fascination. So he liked to watch. She licked her lips and rode his cock up and down again. Wriggling her arms

free, she cupped a breast in each hand and massaged the nipples. She tossed back her head and moaned. His cock twitched inside her. It seemed to be quickly regaining its full thickness. Oh yeah, her little show was definitely doing it for Dr. Marcus Damon, brilliant scientist and billionaire entrepreneur.

She continued riding him and playing with herself, enjoying the growing hunger on his face. After a little while Jan slid her left hand slowly down from her breast and put it between her legs. She lifted herself enough to wrap fingers around his cock. He was slick with her juices. She pressed down and rubbed up against her own hand, pleasuring both of them at the same time.

"Oh god, that is fucking beautiful." Marcus was breathing heavily now.

She wrapped her right hand around his, noticing how small her hand looked next to his large paw, and tugged it upward. He accepted her lead and soon both his hands were on her breasts. She moaned with deep pleasure as he fondled her with rough, demanding caresses.

"I've never wanted anyone more than I want you right now, Cat," he whispered hoarsely into her hair. "I don't care who you are or why you're here. I just want to fuck you forever."

"I don't care anymore either," she said softly and almost believed it was true.

She leaned forward, pressing her hands against the mirror and shoving herself solidly down over his rigid cock. He lifted up onto his knees so he could ease his length out. Then he pushed himself back in, very slowly. Then he did it again. And again. His eyes stayed glued on her image. She moaned and moved against him, urging him on to greater speed.

"Hold still, Cat," he ordered.

Large hands wrapped around her slender waist and held her firmly in place as he continued to fuck her with steady, mindful intent. It was pure torture. She arched her back and practically hissed at him.

"Don't like to take it easy, do you?" he asked and gave her another gradual slide along his glorious cock.

"No. Take me like before, you bastard," she snarled at him. "Fuck me like a real man."

He chuckled. "I doubt you've had a real man before me. Just playthings for your claws. But I know exactly how I want to fuck you," he said and pulled himself completely out.

She almost sobbed at the loss of his cock from inside her. He stood and scooped her up, carrying her cradled against his chest as he strode into the next room. He tossed the laptop off the dining table and onto the sofa with one hand and lay her down on the hard surface. Parting her legs, he quickly positioned himself and thrust deep inside once more.

"Yes, yes, harder please," she pleaded.

"Play with your tits...like you did...before," he grunted between thrusts.

She obligingly placed her hands on her breasts and squeezed the nipples between her fingers. His pace increased into a furious rhythm. Jan writhed on the hard tabletop, her legs wrapped around his back. Gods, yes, this was how she wanted it. Hard and fast. She could feel his fingers digging into her ass, ensuring she could not escape from the punishing use of her body. She hit one plateau after another in quick succession before the final climax ripped through her. As her vagina clenched and released, Marcus exploded with a roar that seemed to shake the room.

Breathing hard, he leaned down over the table, bracing himself with both hands. Jan looked up at him and smiled. She couldn't honestly remember a time when she'd felt more completely satisfied by a lover. He saw her smile and gave her a crooked grin in response. An almost childlike sense of what-the-hell-just-happened hung between them for a frozen moment.

Marcus broke the spell by straightening and moving away from her.

"Time for you to go," he said as he tugged her off the table and into a standing position.

He brushed a strand of hair off her cheek and dropped a quick kiss on her nose then he walked away from her, returning to the bedroom. She quirked an eyebrow at his retreating back. That was the strangest end to an encounter she'd ever known. But then the whole incident had been strange from start to finish. Even with what they had shared, she couldn't entirely believe he was going to let her walk out of his suite without a hassle. Jan shrugged and followed him to retrieve her clothing and other important items.

She couldn't resist throwing him a questioning glance when she got into the bedroom. Marcus was sitting on his bed, plumping up the pillows. He smiled and she turned away to pick her pants off the floor.

"Drop it, Cat." His voice was cold and commanding. She glanced around and froze. The muzzle of a gun was pointed at her. Damn, he must have had it hidden under the pillow.

"You're going to shoot me?" she asked, truly offended by the turn of events.

"Not unless I have to. But I'm not fool enough to let you within striking distance of me now that our little dance is over. I may be bigger and stronger but I know a trained fighter when I see one. So just drop the clothing and step out onto the balcony. You can leave the way you came."

"Leave naked?"

He grinned. "Won't that be a fine sight for anyone looking out their window?"

"Let me put my pants on at least. The climbing harness will hurt like hell otherwise."

"Not a chance. Drop it. Last warning." The gun was rock steady in his hand.

"I can't believe you'd shoot me."

He sighed but his eyes never left hers. "Cat, if you don't drop that in the next five seconds I'll shoot you in the leg, tie you up and call the police. Now, doesn't my first offer sound more appealing?"

The clothing tumbled out of her loosened grasp. She walked toward the balcony with her hands held up in front. She was silently fuming as she cinched up the harness. It was absolutely unbelievable that he'd make her climb down naked—and without her damn prize. Her clients would be beyond pissed. Jan cursed herself. She must have completely lost her touch to find herself in such a predicament. All because she'd stopped to admire a good-looking man instead of making a fast exit.

Shooting one final glare at Marcus, she swung a naked leg over the railing and dropped, allowing the thin line to run quickly. Jan let her body go limp in preparation for the jerk at the end of the line. It still sent pain shooting through her when the rope ran out. She swung into the building, muffling sobs as she grabbed hold of the railing on her twentieth floor balcony. Marcus was certain to be watching and would know that she hadn't gone to street level. She needed to be quick and get out of the hotel in case he changed his mind and tried to stop her at the front door.

Jan scooted inside and grabbed her suitcase. There wasn't much in it. One of the dark blue business suits she'd worn at the conference would have to do. She ran a quick comb through her hair and applied lipstick. Stuffing her climbing harness and lines into the suitcase, she left the room and hurried down the hall.

Her stomach growled as she hailed a cab. She was always hungry after sex and tonight she felt half-starved.

"Find me a decent place with twenty-four-hour room service," she snapped at the driver.

"Yes, ma'am," the cabbie replied and swung out into traffic.

Jan leaned back against the seat, closed her eyes and plotted. No matter how tight the corner looked, there was always a way out. She'd failed at her objective tonight but she wasn't through with Marcus Damon yet, not by a long shot.

* * * * *

Marcus sat down on the edge of the bed and carefully placed the gun on the bedside table. He lifted both hands and ran them through his hair. His hands shook as he lowered them back to his lap. The fact that he had just practically raped a woman and then pulled a gun on her hit him like a ton of bricks. Okay, so she shouldn't have been in his room in the first place. But that didn't excuse his behavior. Shoving a stranger's face into the carpet as he tore her pants off and fucked her from behind was definitely going too far, even if she had been wetter than a Louisiana swamp and arching into him like a cat in heat. Something had turned him into a beast in full rut tonight.

It was the dream. The taunting, disturbing, alluring dream. Every night for the past four nights a woman had come to him in his sleep. She was always in the shadows so there was just the outline of her figure and a wisp of her scent luring him on. He knew she was the most beautiful woman in the world with the kind of certainty you only get in dreams. And he knew that if he could only catch hold of her hand, she would be his forever. Except that she insisted on denying him, making both of them miserable for some incomprehensible reason.

When he'd woken up to find a shadowy woman bending over him, he had been full of the frustrated desire mixed with anger stirred up by his dream. He had pounced on her, overwhelmed by the need to grab hold of her and not let go. It was the fault of irrational dream logic still flooding his circuits.

Marcus snorted quietly. Like he hadn't noticed the hard, toned body, the silky hair or exotic, almond-shaped eyes of the very real woman pinned beneath him. Maybe his dream had primed him for the initial tackle but his subsequent erection had been in response to the very real but just as incomprehensible cat burglar. It was her body and touch that had inflamed him. God, even her voice had stroked him somewhere deep inside. She had unraveled every polite social restraint on his behavior and turned him into an animal, carried away by a carnal lust so strong it was as if he had been drugged.

Cat. A wave of intense emotions washed over him, an uncomfortable mix of shame, virile pride and loss. He had wanted her like no one else he had ever met, had fucked her like a demon from hell, and then let her go without even getting her real name. Not that he could exactly phone her up and ask for a date. Damn. That was exactly what he wanted to do. It was absolutely crazy, but he wanted to date his would-be burglar.

Marcus stood up and walked over to the clothing crumpled on the floor. He picked up her sweater and pressed his face into the folds of dark cloth. A faint spicy musk clung to the fabric. He breathed in deeply then put the shirt down to reach for the black pants. She'd wanted to keep those above everything else and somehow he didn't think it was for modesty's sake. Searching the pockets, he found the real reason. He put the memory stick on the dresser. Tomorrow he'd look through it to confirm his suspicions but there was little doubt in his mind about what she had been attempting to steal – the paper he had decided not to give at the conference.

Marcus sighed and turned toward the balcony. That damn paper had caused him far too much trouble already. He had wanted to share his latest discovery so badly that he'd submitted a synopsis to the conference organizers before he'd really thought through the consequences. It wasn't until he was writing the actual presentation that the potential evil lurking beneath the bright promise of his work had hit home. The ability to not just tag and target genetic markers but actually manipulate genetic code in a living body was incredibly useful – and incredibly dangerous in the wrong hands. Shaking his head at his initial naivety, Marcus focused his attention back on the patio door. Right now he needed to fix that or the hotel might have some awkward questions for him, and his encounter with Cat was something he preferred to share with as few people as possible.

While he went through the motions of returning the sliding glass door to its proper place, Marcus couldn't help contemplating his decision to take the personal and corporate hit for "premature" promises of a breakthrough. There had already been several scathing news articles published this week and his company's share price was

down twenty percent. All because his conscience had gotten the better of his ego. But the fact that someone would hire a pro to break into his hotel room and steal that very research confirmed for him that it had been the right decision. Even with the scant hints that had been in his synopsis, an unscrupulous person saw enough potential in his research to break the law in order to possess more information about it. Who, he wondered, had hired Cat? It was unlikely he'd ever find out—or discover what her real name was. The first question was the important one, he knew that, but for some reason the second mystery bothered him more.

Having jimmied the door back into place, Marcus threw himself onto the bed. The sky was beginning to brighten with the first glimmers of dawn and he really should try to get another hour or so of sleep before his flight home. He shut his eyes but couldn't relax. The encounter with a silky-haired, dangerous little prowler still had his heart racing. He wondered what she was doing at that moment. The image of a lithe, naked body curled up on black silk sheets did nothing to calm his restless body. Even after slaking his lust in the most thorough manner possible, he wanted her again. Cat's scent lingered in his nostrils, the phantom pressure of her slim, elegant hands could still be felt on his back and her throaty chuckle echoed softly in his mind. Marcus couldn't shake the insane belief that he had met the woman of his dreams, and had let her go.

Chapter Two

Jan stared at her face in the mirror. Contact lenses darkened her hazel eyes to a deep brown and the box from the drugstore had turned her nearly black hair to a bright copper color. She couldn't do much about the shape of her face but clever makeup made her cheeks look fuller and her lips thinner. With some padding under her clothes she was sure no one would recognize her. Certainly not a man who had only ever seen her in the dim light of distant skyscrapers.

She pulled her hair into a tight bun and popped on a pair of tortoiseshell glasses. God, she looked a bit like her father's secretary from way back. The one he used to fuck in his office instead of picking her up from dance class like he'd promised. Oh, the car would be there every Tuesday without fail, but usually not with her dad in it. Then she'd have to face her mother's silent fury when she walked into the house alone.

Jan tilted her head and tried on the flirtatious smile that she remembered from the red-haired secretary. That one had actually seemed reasonably smart underneath the makeup and big hairstyle. Her many replacements in subsequent years had been uniformly vacuous. Jan shoved away the hurt and anger that memories of her dad's womanizing still stirred up, even ten years after it all changed.

Why her mother had stayed married to her dad was one of the big mysteries in Jan's personal universe. It had often seemed to her much younger self that they had both fed off the fierce, noisy arguments—that they had used, maybe even deliberately created, the tension in their marriage as fuel for some sort of secret reward system. Otherwise it was impossible to understand what her mother, at least, had gotten out of the relationship and why she had been so utterly devastated when she lost it. No wonder she was still single at thirty-three, Jan thought. Neither of her parents had been

good role models for a successful relationship. Of course, her chosen lifestyle didn't help either.

Jan made a face at the mirror and turned her attention back to business. Dressing carefully, she placed the padding in just the right way to make her slender form look twenty pounds heavier. Jan smoothed down the pale gray suit jacket and stepped into high-heeled black pumps. She looked down and realized she should have bought sensible shoes—the glossy pumps clearly cost way more than the cheap suit—but she hated ugly shoes. Jan shrugged and decided that the idiosyncrasy would make her character more realistic. She grabbed a square leather handbag off the dresser and strode out of her shoebox apartment. Janet Conner was ready for her first day as a research analyst at Damon Laboratories.

It had been ridiculously difficult to find a place to rent in downtown San Francisco. She had finally managed to get a four-month sublet close to a cable car line that would take her within a block of the black glass tower that housed Damon Laboratories. Her stay was almost up as it had taken nearly three months to land the right kind of job. Still, Jan doubted she would need the remaining five weeks to accomplish her objective. Now that she was on the inside, it shouldn't take long to break through security and grab what she wanted.

Forget about a little data-dump from a laptop, she intended to go to the source and snatch the whole shooting match—all the backing research and analysis, not just the summary report. It had taken some fast talking but she'd managed to convince her clients that this was what they really needed and that it was worth the expense, not to mention the risk, of having her go after it. Marcus Damon might have won the first match but the war would go to her.

* * * * *

"Coming for coffee, Janet?" Carlos asked around the partition of her tiny cubicle, his pretty-boy looks enhanced by a smile of hopeful invitation. Suki hovered behind his shoulder, trying to look as if she didn't care whether the new R.A. joined them or not.

Unfortunately Suki's delicate features were very bad at hiding the jealousy that simmered just below the surface. It had not taken Jan long to label her coworkers, and these two were painfully obvious. Mr. Gotta-be-the-center-of-every-woman's-attention and Ms. Fish-still-on-the-line were the last people Jan wanted to hang out with. This morning, in particular, she had something far more interesting planned for her coffee break.

Jan put on a fake, self-depreciating smile. "Oh, sorry, guys, but I really need to get up to speed on this stuff. I feel like I've still got so much to learn."

"You're doing just fine. And it's only been two weeks, give yourself a break," Carlos said. "Seriously, take a break and join us at the coffee shop for once."

"Maybe next week, when I'm done my first report and feel more grounded," Jan offered. She managed to stay in character as the fumbling newbie, even though Carlos' condescending "just fine" comment almost sent her into gales of laughter.

Being a research analyst involved a lot of grunt-level data manipulation, which she could do in her sleep. She even had a pretty good idea about what Dr. Matthews, the scientist at the head of her particular project, was looking for in the results. Combined degrees in computer science and biology, followed by a couple years of med school, made her more than qualified for her current position. She could have aimed higher in the organization but then she wouldn't have had so much time at a keyboard. Not to mention the anonymity. This dull position offered the perfect gateway into Damon Laboratories' computer system.

"I'll hold you to that!" Carlos replied with a confident grin.

"Sure," Jan said, then let out a small sigh of relief when the pair finally walked off to join the rest of the staff clustered by the door. With any luck she wouldn't be here next week.

The little anime cat which she had put on the corner of her desktop had been tormenting her with a wide grin all morning. That meant her worms had finally cracked in to the most restricted part of the system. The security team for Damon Laboratories

was good and she'd had to use every trick in her book to break through the layers without getting noticed. She'd been beginning to worry that there might not be enough time on her sublet after all. The cat's persistent grin had been a welcome surprise and she'd been itching to check it out since eight-thirty a.m. But Jan knew she'd need more than a few stolen seconds to determine if her hack had actually worked or just landed in a hole. Now she'd have a good half hour to herself while the others enjoyed their regular extended Monday morning coffee break. Plenty of time to sneak a peek at what was hiding behind door number one.

A few minutes later Jan was scowling at the screen. Her worms had found a way in all right, through a hole that was already in place. Someone else had sliced a twisty little trail across the thickest security barrier in the organization's computer system. Jan could feel the muscles in her back tense at the markings left by another hacker. Had her clients decided to double-up, not trusting her to do the job on her own? Or, more likely, another company was also interested in Marcus Damon's secret research—and had gotten there ahead of her. Jan carefully examined the virtual crime scene and spotted signs of considerable traffic going into and out of the hole. Someone had been very busy in this neighborhood recently.

The muffled din of approaching voices was sufficient warning for her to tap a single key on her keyboard. The disturbing information was instantly wiped off her screen and replaced with a dry lab report documenting last quarter's various test results related to Dr. Brenda Matthews' project.

Jan spent the rest of the day pretending to review old lab reports while actually crafting and releasing little data probes to sniff around the other hacker's trail. The strange thing was that the hack seemed to start at the innermost ring of security. She could find no traces of anyone worming their way into the system at any of the other barriers leading up to that point. Also, the hack through that final wall was an elegant bit of work, yet there was a messy knot of comings and goings scattered around the doorway. Either the hacker got sloppy and decided he no longer needed to clean up

after himself or the person sneaking in and out was a different player. Jan thought it far more likely to be the latter as a good hacker would automatically wipe away such tracks.

"Is it starting to make sense to you yet?" a cool voice asked from her doorway.

"Yes, I'm very nearly there," Jan replied, giving Suki a small smile. "I think I'll manage to draw some conclusions from the amalgamation of data sets very soon."

"Conclusions aren't part of your job," Suki said with a sniff. "Just run the analysis as specified and have the reports on Dr. Matthews' desk before the end of the week."

"But I always like to understand what I'm working on," Jan said with wide-eyed honesty. "And Damon Laboratories provides such interesting work."

"Damon Laboratories is leading the way in genetic research in America. We're the best in the world at what we do," the Asian woman gushed. "We're at the cutting edge of research into Alzheimer's, finding cures for a variety of cancers, developing —"

"The most awesome diet pill ever, if Dr. Matthews' research pans out," Jan interjected. "Talk about a gold mine!"

Suki gave her a scathing look. "I suppose that's important to some women. I've never had to diet in my life."

"I suppose we can't all be boyishly slim," Jan shot back and angled her amply padded bosom toward the other woman.

Jan was still chuckling to herself as she pushed her way out the main doors of the building an hour later, hunting for a quick lunch. Between her lingering enjoyment of the expression on Suki's face at the end of their exchange and the worrisome puzzle of another hacker, Jan wasn't paying much attention to her surroundings. When she charged straight into a large, solid body she didn't just stumble, she fell. Her foot missed the first step down the wide concrete stairs that led to the entrance and she tumbled onto the cement several feet below. Thankfully her body knew how to fall and instinctively softened so she took the impact with minimal damage. Still, her head felt like it must have clipped the edge of a stair and her right knee was throbbing.

"Are you all right?" a deep, familiar voice asked.

Jan's fuzzy gaze locked onto the elegant long-fingered hand being held out to her, tracked up an arm encased in a very fine, dark-blue wool and settled on Marcus Damon's concerned brown eyes. "I'm fine," she mumbled and picked herself up off the ground without the offered assistance. "Sorry to bump you, Dr. Damon," she added and turned away.

A heavy hand landed on her shoulder.

"You were lucky. You really should watch where you're going," he scolded in a soft voice and forced her to face him again. His eyes skimmed over her features. "Do you work here?"

"Yes, sir. I'm the new research analyst."

He frowned faintly. "Have we met?"

Jan swallowed the lump in her throat, suddenly nervous. "No, sir." Marcus had passed her cubicle once on the way back from Dr. Matthews' office and she had spotted him getting onto the elevator a couple times but he had never so much as glanced her way. She was just another cog in the grand machine of Damon Laboratories, which was exactly how she wanted it. Jan gave his face a quick scan, noticing again the bold angles of his nose and chin, how his dark hair curled softly above heavy eyebrows. She remembered what it had felt like to bury her fingers in that unruly hair.

Marcus' frown deepened and he removed the hand that had been holding her shoulder to gently lift her chin. "Are you sure? Because I never forget a face and I'm certain that I've seen you somewhere before."

"My-my sister is a model. You may have seen her in advertisements," Jan lied quickly. Her heart was racing, and not just from the fall or the fear of discovery. Marcus Damon was every bit as appealing in daylight and dressed in a fine Italian suit as he had been that night three months ago. Well, maybe not quite as alluring as when he was buck naked, but there was still enough sex appeal oozing off him to make her feel faint.

Or maybe that was from hitting her head on the pavement. In any case, she was clearly in no condition to have a sparring match with her new boss.

“I’m so sorry to bump into you, Dr. Damon. Please forgive me,” she said and disengaged from his touch. She turned and limped quickly away.

Jan’s breathing did not return to normal until she was almost done with the bowl of San Francisco’s famous clam chowder that she’d ordered at a nearby tourist joint. She’d had every intention of grabbing a sandwich and getting back to her computer as quickly as possible but her surprise encounter with Mr. Tall-dark-and-totally-hot had pushed her so far off-center that she needed time to collect herself before going back to the office. It was ridiculous that a man could make her heart skip a beat just by touching her face and asking a few probing questions. She was a pro and narrow escapes were part of the job.

The suspicion that merely being next to that particular set of muscular shoulders could rob her of composure was even less reassuring. Sure he was attractive. Yes, their one night of sex had been steamier than the heart of the Amazon jungle. But he was still just a man. And the last man she should be getting dreamy over. If Marcus made the connection between her disguised appearance and the woman in his New York hotel room, she was in serious trouble. He had her clothing and her memory stick—plenty of damning evidence to get her locked up for a very long time. Explaining how he had gotten hold of her clothing might make for an interesting trial but she doubted that would stop him from pressing charges if he found her digging around the data at his corporate headquarters. Nope, the best thing would be for her to grab the data she had come for and get as far away from Damon Laboratories, and the far-too-appealing Marcus Damon, as was humanly possible.

Yet the mystery of the other hacker bothered her. The evidence she’d unearthed that morning made her suspect that someone very high up in Damon Laboratories had paid for a hack into the company’s most secure section of the network. Then he, or she, had spent weeks sneaking peeks behind that wall, watching over something. *It’s none of*

your business, Jan told herself sternly, do what you're getting paid to do and get out. But she had somehow developed a strong possessive streak in relation to Marcus Damon's secret research and it grated on her that someone else had been nosing around that sensitive area. A few days of digging and she'd have the puzzle solved. She could still be gone by Friday. Surely it was safe to stay that long.

Jan re-entered the glass tower that housed Damon Laboratories more cautiously than she had exited it earlier. She dutifully showed her identity badge to the commissionaire at the front desk—a pity he didn't have Marcus' memory for faces, after two weeks he still questioned her every time she entered the building. She let out a small sigh of relief when the elevator scanned and accepted the electronic ID on the badge. Part of her had worried that perhaps Marcus had made the connection after all and she was already locked out.

Jan settled back into her chair and prepared for a busy afternoon. She downloaded her favorite thief program onto the network and pointed it along the pathway cut by her worms and the previous hacker. It would run in the background while her screen filled with numbers that represented months worth of lab test results. She had already done the analysis and drafted the report required by Dr. Matthews but the raw numbers provided the most impressive display of diligence for anyone who might happen to peek over the divider. It also offered the best cover for her fingers occasionally tapping on the keyboard. With the written report it would be too easy to see that she was not actually typing anything like what was on the screen.

A single line of constantly changing numbers and disjointed bits of text at the very bottom of her screen was all that betrayed the communication between herself and the various electronic hunters and gatherers that she had let loose in the system. Her thief program was slowly siphoning off information while other programs were snooping around for connections to anyone who had used the hole-in-the-wall before her. The self-imposed detective work was by far the more difficult task and required her focused attention and active involvement.

By five o'clock most of her coworkers had left and Jan leaned back to close her eyes for a moment. Tracing old data trails was slow and painstaking, especially as she had to do it while avoiding detection by the security software. It could take her days to reach any firm conclusions. Fortunately the data dump was going smoothly, seventy-two percent complete according to the status bar. The job she had been hired to do would be finished soon.

Two hours later Jan was sitting on the bed in her closet-sized apartment. The data dump had gone very smoothly and she'd left the office with an external hard drive packed full of information. She'd been so eager to delve into Marcus Damon's secrets that she'd forgotten to pick up dinner along the way home. Munching her way through a bag of taco chips to stave off starvation, Jan booted up her laptop. When the files started opening on her screen she was thrilled to discover that most of the material wasn't even encrypted. There were only a handful of documents that needed to be decoded so she set her programs to work on them while she glanced through and sorted the rest of the information.

By ten o'clock her stomach was growling loudly but she hardly noticed. All the background data, analysis and reports that had been hidden behind Damon Laboratories' tightest security barriers lay exposed for her viewing pleasure. Normally she'd look the secured information over to see if it seemed to be complete and coherent, then pass the material on to her clients. It wasn't her job to understand or assess the content of the corporate information she'd been hired to steal. In this case, however, Jan felt a strong need to know what Marcus had been up to. Her grumbling stomach was a distant distraction as she unraveled the mystery of Damon Laboratories' much sought-after research.

* * * * *

Marcus rolled over and cursed the glowing red numbers on his bedside alarm clock. It was past two in the morning and he'd have to get up in less than four hours. He sighed and flopped onto his back again. He'd had his strange haunting dream again

but this time that red-headed girl had somehow worked her way into it. Why the hell was he obsessing about a clumsy new research analyst? She wasn't even his type. Sexy, he supposed, with big curves stuffed into a tight suit, but he really hated the fake red hair. She had a pretty face though. An interesting, somehow familiar face. Probably it was her sister that he dimly recalled seeing in an advertisement. A more beautiful and alluring sister selling perfume, or maybe lingerie. That must be what he was remembering and responding to.

Marcus reached down to wrap a hand around his erect penis. Damn but he needed to get laid again soon. It had been several weeks since he'd had sex. Normally that was fine, he could distract himself with work. But over the last few months his body had felt like it was on fire and these middle-of-the-night episodes were happening far too frequently. It was like a fever he couldn't shake. He needed a girlfriend. A warm body in his bed every night. Someone he could slake his lust on. Focusing his thoughts on the woman he'd been with last, a lovely blonde called Ashley, Marcus tightened his grip and pumped. But the face of the red-haired woman, mixed with images of a lithe, slim body, took over. He groaned and gave up trying to control his mental imagery. Freed to seek his deepest, darkest desire, the memories and emotions of a night three months before rose in a tidal wave and swamped him.

Marcus' dick thickened as he recalled what it felt like to mount Cat from behind and slam into her perfectly rounded ass. Even brief, furtive replays of that scene could give him an erection at the most inappropriate times. Like in the boardroom yesterday.

Settling into a rhythm, he masturbated while imagining Cat riding his cock up and down, her eyes glazed with lust, her swollen lips open and panting. God but she was the hottest fuck he'd ever had. Thinking about her writhing on the hotel room table, her hands teasing rosebud nipples on firm, rounded breasts, his cock throbbed with an almost painful urge to dive into that sweet cunt again. Marcus tugged harder and his other hand cupped his balls. They were aching for release and only her image would grant that mercy. It was her body, her voice and scent that had accompanied every

single orgasm he'd had in the last three months. Marcus groaned and gave his cock a final hard tug before spilling semen onto his belly. Maybe a girlfriend wasn't such a good idea. At least when he was alone he didn't need to feel guilty about Cat's image imposing itself over every other woman's face while he climaxed.

Chapter Three

Jan arrived at the office a bit late Tuesday morning, carrying a grande double-shot latte and trying not to look as tired as she felt. It had taken her a very long time to fall asleep last night. The full implications of the revealed research disturbed her more than she cared to admit. She now understood Marcus' reasons for keeping this project under wraps. Marcus had not pulled the paper from the New York Biological Research Conference because it was incomplete but because the practical implications of his research were enormous, and frightening.

For the first time in nearly a decade she seriously considered retiring from corporate espionage. Marcus and Damon Laboratories were so different from her usual marks. Her work generally revealed the ugly side of corporate America, where greed and naked self-interest drove decisions at the highest levels. Where the manipulation and exploitation of financial numbers, of staff and clients, of legal loopholes and any competitor's exposed weaknesses were all fair game. When the marks were as immoral as her clients she had no trouble betraying their secrets and taking her cut of the enormous wealth pooling around corporate boardrooms.

Marcus was certainly wealthy, although less so than a few months ago when his company had taken that huge dive on the stock market, but there was no stink of corruption tied to that money. His company didn't engage in shady accounting, there was no hidden environmental damage being papered over with feel-good green slogans, no possibility of his company using foreign child labor or abusing illegal immigrants, there were no political payouts—he donated equally to both parties—and even the absolutely essential animal testing was being done to the most humane standards possible. She had looked under every rock over the last few months and nothing slimy had revealed itself, except maybe whoever had hired that other hacker.

However, she had taken the job and reneging on her clients was not an option. Even with all the protections she used to maintain her anonymity she was well aware of the fact that breaking a deal like this could get her killed, and it would certainly end her career. Jan also knew from past experience that after a month lying on a beach somewhere she'd be itching to do something challenging again and eager for the next job. She'd be bored and the urge to go after another corporate mark would likely re-emerge. Besides, after nine years in the business she was at the top of her game and the perks, monetary and otherwise, were too sweet to leave behind.

Nodding to Carlos and a few others, Jan hurried to her cubicle. She switched on her computer and got ready to continue hunting. One of her suppliers had come through with a specialized tracker program and she was eager to try it out.

"You don't look very perky today," Suki observed.

Jan shrugged and nonchalantly tilted the screen farther away from the cubical entrance where Suki hovered. "Had a hard time getting to sleep."

"Overwhelmed with embarrassment at making such an idiot of yourself in front of Dr. Damon yesterday?" Suki asked with mock sympathy.

Of course that story had gotten around. Jan sighed. "I fell. It happens."

"But literally falling at his feet? I mean really. You couldn't have been more obvious."

Jan was too tired to stay in character. "Obvious about what?" she snapped.

"Good God, Janet. Do you think we haven't noticed that hungry look in your eyes whenever anyone even mentions his name?"

Jan scowled at the slender woman. Was her silly infatuation really so noticeable? "He's brilliant. I admire him."

"Of course you do, you poor thing. And he has so many *beautiful* women admiring him." Suki put a clear emphasis on the word beautiful. "No wonder you felt the need to stoop to such a stunt. Pity it didn't work."

"It was an accident," Jan replied icily. "I couldn't imagine trying to time something like that. But obviously you have, Suki."

"Really!" With a sniff, the other woman finally left to find her own cubicle.

Jan rubbed sore eyes and scowled blindly at the screen. Was her attraction to Marcus Damon that noticeable or was Suki just fishing? "Doesn't matter," she muttered to herself. Wounded pride was the only real consequence and she could live with that for a few more days.

The tracker program was finished loading and Jan directed it toward the still-mysterious knot outside the security breach. It was the one smelly spot in this whole damn saintly company. Someone inside the company, probably very high up, had paid for a spyhole into Marcus' private data. Hopefully this sweet piece of programming would find the answers quickly and she could disappear tonight. Jan was anxious to be gone and have nothing more to do with Damon Laboratories or the noble, self-sacrificing Marcus Damn Damon.

Then why am I still here? whispered an annoying little voice inside her head. Her real job was done. This was just curiosity...or an unprofessional, unhealthy interest in the well-being of the Sexiest Genius in America—so labeled by the local gossip rag. A man who showed up at every public event with a different woman hanging from his arm. A man who could make a huge scientific breakthrough and then pretend that he'd fluffed it and shrug off the cost to both his company and personal reputation, all for the greater good.

Jan sighed and silently acknowledged that she was being stupid but opened up the report for Dr. Matthews anyway. She would pretend to work on it today and then hand it in at five. The company wouldn't be able to say that Janet Conner failed to perform her duties. Tomorrow she'd suddenly quit because of an illness in the family. That letter was already drafted and ready to go as well.

"Ms. Conner?"

Jan looked up to see her immediate boss standing just inside her cubicle. Dr. Matthews' blonde hair was cut stylishly short and she was wearing a beautiful dark red designer suit. Jan looked back down at her watch, surprised to see that it was nearly noon already.

"I'm finishing up the report," Jan said. She was surprised that her supervisor was even bothering to ask for the document. Other than a very brief welcome and introduction to her duties the other woman hadn't paid any attention to her during the past two weeks.

"Um, yes, that's good. But it isn't why I'm here. Dr. Damon has asked to see you in his office."

Jan's heart skipped a beat. "Now? Certainly. I'll head right up. Thanks for letting me know." She looked regretfully at the screen, knowing it was time to run—even without unraveling the mystery of the other data sneak.

"I'm...um...to escort you there personally," Dr. Matthews said, and then hurried on, "It's a big building and I'm to make sure you don't get lost. Dr. Damon does not like to be kept waiting."

"Of course. How considerate," Jan said dryly.

She stood up and followed the expensive red suit to the elevators. It was clear that something was up. Still, if Marcus wanted to have her arrested he could have done that without this meeting. Maybe he had a deal to offer. Or maybe he wasn't completely sure and she could play this out for one more day.

It was a bit of a maze to get to Marcus' office from the elevator but Jan was sure anyone along the way would have directed her there quickly enough. The escort clearly wasn't necessary, at least not for the given reason.

"Good morning, Deidre," Dr. Matthews said to Marcus' personal assistant. "Janet Conner is here to see Dr. Damon. He's expecting her."

The attractive brunette behind the desk smiled but Jan could see the unspoken question in her eyes. "Please follow me, Ms. Conner." The young woman stood and opened the door to Marcus' office.

Jan nodded and walked forward to face her fate. The tiredness of an hour ago vanished, swept away by a surge of adrenaline.

* * * * *

Marcus looked up from the large, minimalist table he used as a desk and watched the red-headed research analyst totter into the room in her too-high heels. She didn't seem particularly nervous, looking around his office with open curiosity. Other than the view from the window behind him there was very little to see. A thick white area rug lay in front of his desk, two simple black leather chairs were set against the far wall, some exercise equipment, including a padded bench, were off to the left and a row of dark wooden file cabinets were lined up on the other wall. He didn't like a lot of clutter.

"Please shut the door," he said quietly to Deirdre.

Janet Conner, or whatever her real name was, stopped in the center of the plush rug and looked at him uncertainly. He hadn't bothered to move one of the chairs forward for her to sit on. "You asked to see me, sir?" There was some discomfort in the question but no discernable guilt.

He stood and walked toward her, suddenly not as certain of his insight as he had been last night. She looked so different, behaved and even sounded different. The woman he remembered moved like a stalking predator and sex appeal had radiated from her as naturally as gold glowed in the sunshine. This woman tried too hard and ended up looking awkward, a book-smart girl trying to play the sexpot and coming across as fake as her glaring red hair. If this was his Cat, she was one hell of an actor.

"Pardon me, let me get you something to sit on," he said and stepped past her to grab one of the tall black leather chairs. He placed it a few feet in front of the desk, stood behind it and gestured for her to sit. When she obeyed he leaned forward and

took a long, slow breath in. He smiled and moved over to his desk. He leaned against the hard edge and crossed his arms. That had been all the proof he needed.

"It hit me late last night...where we met," he said.

The woman smiled back hesitantly. "I'm sorry, sir, but I really don't think so." She smoothed the simple brown skirt down over her lap.

"Nice try, Cat, but you should have changed your perfume."

"I don't wear perfume—it gives me a headache." He could see her swallow, like she knew she'd let something slip.

"Ah. That explains why you didn't disguise your scent. The outfit and hair are pretty good though, I'll give you that. I would never have recognized you from a distance."

She stared at him in silence for a long moment, her face carefully expressionless. Then she stood up and walked to the large pane of glass that overlooked the city. Noticing the way her walk had shifted into a sexy glide, he knew she'd decided to give up the pretense. She reached back and tugged at the clip that held up her hair. It dropped in loose waves down her back. He remembered the feel of those silky strands in his hands. Slowly she turned to face him. "Well, what's the deal then?"

"What's your real name?"

She thought about it for a moment then answered, "Jan."

"Not Janet. But close enough that you'd automatically react to it. Very good."

"I am very good." She shrugged. "But you're better, obviously. To catch me twice. Now what do you want?"

"I could have you arrested," he said. "Clearly you don't yet have what you came here for or you wouldn't still be playing my loyal employee. However, I have enough evidence from our past encounter."

She nodded. "You could. But you haven't called in the police. So, you want something from me."

She had his number and they both knew it. This was the woman who had been haunting his nights for months. Of course there was something he wanted from her. He'd spent most of the morning dreaming up possible scenarios. Marcus took a step closer and ran a finger down her cheek. "What are you prepared to offer, little Cat?"

She looked up at him through her lashes and smiled. He wondered how he could have missed those exotic almond-shaped eyes, even if they were the wrong color and hidden behind those awful glasses.

"To avoid jail? Pretty much anything," she purred. Her hand was on his chest, just lying there, but already his heart was beating faster than normal.

"Then get out of that ugly suit," he said. He desperately wanted to see her as he remembered, lithe and powerful. The padded bosom and distorted figure were an offense to her beauty.

"Here? Now?" she asked, gesturing toward the door.

He grinned. "Oh, don't worry about your little shrieks, this room is pretty near soundproof."

"Don't you have a meeting or something to go to?" she asked.

"I've cleared the next two hours."

"Two hours?" She raised an eyebrow at him and a small smile played across her lips. It was more of a tease than a taunt.

"I intend to enjoy this." Marcus reached out and wove a hand into her hair. Then he tugged, hard. "Now, Jan. Or we play a much less amusing game."

"Your word that I get to leave, without your lackeys coming after me, when the two hours are up?"

Marcus nodded. Probably he was crazy but he wanted her so badly that no price seemed too high. And really, he couldn't imagine facing her in a courtroom.

Her eyes narrowed but she slipped off the jacket, letting it fall on the floor. Her fingers found the first button on the plain white blouse and she proceeded to undo it

with deliberate slowness, watching Marcus carefully. He smiled and stepped back, sitting down on his chair and leaning back to enjoy the show. He had no problems with a lengthy striptease. The blouse took a while to cast off but she pulled the padded underwear and skirt down in one go. At that point she was wearing nothing but thigh-high cream-colored stockings and her expensive heels. His cock, already growing stiff, stirred at the sight and he couldn't help but notice her nipples were hard as pebbles. Jan reached for a stocking.

"You can stop there," Marcus said, running his gaze over her body. "That's a much better look for you. Although I preferred the dark hair. And weren't your eyes lighter?"

She shrugged and crossed her arms, hiding her breasts as much as possible. That act of modesty, probably just as phony as her previous role, served to focus his attention firmly back on her body. There was nothing wrong with his memory. She was as unbelievably lovely as he recalled. He stood and walked up to her, stopping only when she was practically touching his chest. Jan tilted her head and looked up at him. "What now, Dr. Damon?"

He bent his head and kissed her. Electricity shot through him down to his toes. He jerked back, surprised. Her hands were on his shoulders and she pulled at him, her eyes begging him to kiss her properly. He wanted to fall into those eyes, drown in them and never come back. He wanted to kiss her until the fire in his blood ignited the same deep burn in her and she was clinging to him and panting with need. Yet something told him those pleading eyes were only a mask. She slid from role to role like a chameleon. He was close to betraying things that he didn't even want to acknowledge to himself, while she played the game like a professional. It was just a game. He had to remember that.

Marcus removed her hands from his shoulders and pushed her away. "Go over to the desk," he said, a rough edge to his voice.

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Why?"

He shook his head and kept his expression stern. "Yours is not to question why. Just do as I say. Anything I want. That was the deal."

"Yes, master. Anything you want." Was there really a quiver in her voice? Was that a sign of fear — or excitement?

She reached out to stroke the slab of thick dark mahogany and looked back over shoulder at him. "What now?"

"Now you bend over." He didn't want to see her face, or maybe he didn't want her to see his.

Cat obeyed and leaned over, resting her elbows on the desk. Her beautiful bare ass was stuck up behind her like a beacon. "Like this?" she asked, looking straight ahead.

His cock was aching for release from his trousers. Marcus unbuckled his belt and lowered the zipper. Cat would be his sex toy for an hour or so and then he'd throw her out. Just like she deserved. He should have her arrested. He was doing her a favor, really. And she'd enjoy it. Just like last time. He would make her climax, make her scream and become real, at least for that moment.

"Yeah. Exactly like that." He walked over to stand behind her. His hands cupped her buttocks and squeezed. "I didn't get a chance to fully appreciate this view the other night. I intend to make up for that today." He massaged her from lower back to thighs and back up again. Then he moved one hand between her slightly spread legs and let the tip of his thumb skim over her clit. He chuckled. "You're already wet, Cat. You like this game, don't you?"

"Is this how you play with all the girls, Dr. Damon?"

"Jealous?" he asked and thrust two strong fingers up into her vagina. She grunted in answer and he started into a fast, rhythmic finger-fuck. His other hand clenched her ass, pressing into the crack. Just as she was starting to squirm he slipped a finger into her asshole and began to work that too. Inarticulate moans were issuing from her mouth and Marcus knew she was holding back a scream. Her body tensed and she sagged against the desk with what was almost a whimper.

She was just coming down from her climax but he had no patience to wait any longer. He stepped between her legs and his cock probed for entrance to her pussy. As

if eager for more, she spread her legs wider and tilted her ass toward him. He accepted the invitation and speared into her without hesitation, thrusting hard and deep. He grunted and pulled out only to pound into her again. His balls hit her backside with a loud slap at each thrust. Fingers dug into her hips, pulling her tight against him so he could bury every last inch of his long cock inside her. It was pure joy to him when she finally screamed. Somehow he held on to control.

Her whole body was quivering and glistening with sweat as Marcus pulled out. His hands gently stroked her back while she panted. He waited while she pulled the threads of herself back together again.

"Go sit on my exercise bench," Marcus said softly.

Jan straightened and looked at him over her shoulder. His hand, still resting on the small of her back, gave a light shove. She nodded and wordlessly followed his instructions. She sat down on the bench like a schoolgirl, her knees together and arms crossed over her naked breasts. Her innocent expression was so obviously a pretense that he smiled.

"Put your legs farther out," he directed. She did. "Spread them so I can see your sweet pussy." Marcus enjoyed the new view but it wasn't quite enough. "Hold on to the back edge of the bench and arch your back."

She tossed her hair back and gave him the pose he wanted. "A connoisseur of pornographic images, are you, Marcus?"

"Men are visual creatures," he acknowledged. "And you are very much a vision." He admired her while stripping off his clothing. Then he added, "I want to see you touch yourself."

She lifted one hand and cradled her left breast. "Like this?"

"No, not like that. Fuck yourself for me, Cat."

He watched in fascination as her hand moved down her flat belly until it rested between her splayed legs. She sank two fingers into her pussy and moved her hand in a circular, in and out fashion. Getting into the show, she threw her head back and

squirmed on her high heels. Her legs moved even farther apart and he delighted in the unabashed exhibitionism.

"Don't you want to come closer?" she asked, her voice husky and low. "Doesn't your cock want to feel how hot and wet I am?"

"Do you want me to fuck you again, little Cat?"

"Yes, I want you to fuck me, Marcus. How do you want to take me this time? On the floor? Like we did in the hotel room in New York?"

"Mmmm... Yes, that does sound good." Marcus moved to stand directly in front of her. He stared down at her exposed body. "First, though, you're going to suck my cock."

She sat up straight and bent her head obediently. "Yes, master."

The wet line of her tongue ran from the base of his erect shaft to the top then back down, slathering him with her saliva. On the next pass she circled around the swollen tip several times, flicking it with her tongue. He moaned quietly. Jan reached up with both hands and found his ass, grabbing the bare skin of his taut buttocks. Her mouth sank around his penis, tongue still pressing the tip. He moved his hips in slight pumping motions. A groan escaped him and he pressed himself deeper into her throat. Jan sucked and he gasped. He had to withdraw.

"Don't stop, Marcus. I like to suck your beautiful cock," she said, pulling him back toward her.

"But this isn't about you. It's about what I want, remember?" His words were thick and his legs were trembling.

She licked the tip of his penis and it twitched automatically. A rapid flicking of her tongue along the ridge and Marcus' hands buried themselves in her hair.

"Don't you like this, master?" she asked in mock innocence.

He couldn't hold in the short burst of laughter. "Jesus, Cat. I'm about to come all over your face."

"Then do it," she encouraged.

He grabbed her hair and pulled her head back roughly. "No. I'm not done with you yet. Go to the rug and get on your hands and knees."

She quickly moved to the rug and knelt down. Marcus followed right behind her. Before her hands even touched the ground his were kneading her ass, spreading and pinching her cheeks.

"I could play with this perfect ass for hours. Do you like it when I do this?"

"Yes. I like it very much."

"But you would rather that I fuck you, right, Cat?"

"Yes."

"Say it. Beg me to take you."

"Please, Marcus, please fuck me. Please mount me like a stallion with a mare in heat. Please take me hard and wild." It was all an act, of course, but it sounded like begging and that was good enough for him.

"Do you dream of me, Cat? Do you wake up horny as hell, wanting me? Do you," Marcus grunted as he rammed into her, "imagine me doing this to you?"

"Yes. Hell yes."

She lowered herself onto her elbows and angled her ass up toward him, wordlessly inviting him to fuck her even harder. Marcus responded gladly and slammed into her over and over again until a tidal wave of ecstasy lifted him. He submitted to the ultimate pleasure of the moment and climaxed with a shuddering roar.

* * * * *

Jan lay on the soft rug and slowly came back to herself. Her heart was still pounding when her mind finally switched into gear. She rolled over and looked at the man lying beside her.

"Marcus," she asked, "Do you think of me...sometimes?"

She watched his expression shift from a sated calm to hard amusement.

"You are the sexiest woman I've ever encountered." She waited in silence for him to answer the question. He stood and began dressing. Throwing her ugly brown suit at her, he continued in a cold voice, "And the most damn dangerous. Get dressed while I call you an escort to the door."

For a moment Jan felt hurt, then she shrugged and started to dress. She had the answer already, getting him to admit it now was just vanity. He had all but said that he dreamed about her. It was clear that he was disturbed by how much he wanted her. Marcus was probably silently berating himself for the promise he had made to let her go again. Jan put the clip back in her hair.

The security guard arrived, a slightly overweight thirty-something with tight black curls and Hispanic features. "Please show Ms. Conner to the door," Marcus said. "And make sure she doesn't take any detours along the way."

Jan ignored the security guard hovering in the door and gave Marcus a long look. "Thank you, Dr. Damon," she said and held back the smile at his puzzled expression. She made sure her walk was a measured, swaying performance as she left his grand office.

In the elevator, she stood close to the security guard. "My office is on the fourth floor," she said when he pressed the button for the ground level.

"Ah... Dr. Damon said to take you straight to the door." He was trying hard to look stern.

"Of course, and it was very nice of him to make sure I don't get lost again. But my purse, my keys, I can't go anywhere without those, can I?" She looked up at him with big, moist eyes.

He shifted a half step back but reached over and hit the button for her floor. "Just to pick up your purse."

She made sure he was following her when they got off the elevator. As expected, Suki's head popped up as soon as she got to her cubicle.

"What's going on?" the other woman asked, a mixture of curiosity, glee and false concern in her voice.

"I'm leaving," Jan announced with a sad little snuffle.

"Why?"

Jan ignored her and looked over at the guard. "Could you please call me a cab? I don't think I can face a crowded cable car."

She answered Suki while she bent down to retrieve her purse from the bottom drawer of the desk. "Terrible news. My uncle is very sick, dying. I have to go home. Mom will need me. She relied on him so much." The guard was busy trying to listen in and order a cab at the same time. It was an easy move to wipe her hand across the front of her computer where the memory stick still jutted like a tiny beacon and drop it into her purse. Jan straightened and took the picture of her fake parents off the desk and stared at it. "Especially since my dad died last year."

Putting her purse on the keyboard while she packed the picture away allowed her to hit the two keys that initiated a wipe of all questionable activities related to her terminal. She picked up the small potted plant she'd brought in last week and handed it to the guard.

"Thank you so much for helping me," she said and reached for her coat. "That's all I need to take."

"Umm... Well, I'm sorry about your uncle." Suki managed the polite words.

Jan shrugged uncertainly and gave the other woman a long look that said how much she doubted that sentiment. "I really liked working here. Say goodbye to everyone for me, please? Especially Carlos, I'll miss him most of all."

She hoped that would stick in Suki's uptight little ass. Certainly the story about her dying relative would be buzzing around the building within minutes. There might still be some questions as the security guard didn't really fit in, but she'd done all she could to craft a somewhat believable exit scene on a moment's notice.

Settling into the cab, holding the plant on her lap, Jan smiled. She had pulled off her heist and was still a free woman. The smile widened into a grin. And Marcus was going crazy thinking about her.

* * * * *

He stood in front of the glass wall of his office, watching Cat exit the building and climb into a taxi. It had taken longer than a simple elevator ride to the ground floor but not by much. She couldn't have caused any real mischief in those few moments, not with a security guard at her shoulder. Marcus let out a relieved breath. A serendipitous encounter had allowed him to catch the little thief again before she could do any harm. He didn't think she'd be back for a third try.

A weight of misery suddenly landed on him. The few hours they'd shared had been the most exciting and stimulating in his entire life. Jan wasn't just beautiful, she was quick-witted, daring and playful. A smart, fiery woman who also knew how to laugh and tease. He wished from the depths of his soul that they had met under different circumstances.

Marcus spun away from the glass and sat down at his desk. He glanced blindly at his calendar, not really seeing the tasks he had set for himself for the afternoon. What was the point of being a billionaire if he couldn't have what he really wanted? Even if what he wanted was not good for him—and probably didn't want him in anywhere near the same way. Then again, there were ways to at least give himself a shot. Driven by wild impulse, Marcus picked up the phone and dialed. She wasn't a dream, Jan was a real woman, eating and sleeping and living a real life somewhere. There had to be a way of finding her, and finding out more about her.

What he would do with that information, he had no idea. Cat was dangerous, an intelligent criminal who had a clear interest in his genetic research. Every rational cell in his body was saying he was lucky to be rid of her. Yet she was the most fascinating woman he had ever met and he couldn't just let her walk out of his life. First he would hire someone to find her then he'd decide what to do about it.

The possibility of dialing her number and asking Cat out to dinner made him smile. He knew it was crazy and maybe when he had her number in front of him he'd decide to turn away from risking everything in such a bizarre relationship. But right now he needed to keep the possibility open. Letting go of Cat simply left too much emptiness behind. And he wasn't the kind of man who gave up on a dream so easily.

Chapter Four

It wasn't a particularly imposing house. An old red brick building, in good repair and in a very nice neighborhood but it was not as grand as she would have expected for a billionaire. The growing shadows of a soft May evening made the house seem sad and lonely. It looked like the poor stepsister compared to the modern palace next door. However, Jan knew that the interior had been gutted and completely redone five years ago. Municipal permits were great at tracking those kinds of things. Finding out about the security installations had taken a bit more digging.

There was a fence, of course. Six feet of stone topped with wrought iron, and a very modern-looking metal gate. But the real security was a network of cameras and motion detectors. Jan left her rental car and sauntered across the street. When she got to the corner of the lot she bent over as if her laces had come undone, although there were no laces on her snug climbing shoes. Listening and looking around as unobtrusively as possible, she determined that no one was nearby. This was the trickiest part because there was no way over that fence without being exposed. She just had to be quick about it. Jan tossed her line, jumped, climbed and was dropping down the other side in less than ten seconds. She landed behind a rhododendron bush, causing a branch to break in the process. It was a good thing no one was around to hear.

Coiling up the line, she tucked it away in her waist bag and pulled out a small pair of binoculars. Jan mentally rehearsed the next stage as she wriggled forward on her stomach to scan the house. Cameras filmed from the left side of the gate and all four corners of the house. Also, twenty feet from the house were the first lines of motion detectors. But Marcus would soon be leaving for a big charity event and those would be shut off to let his car through. It would take two minutes to reset the beams. She had that long to make her way up to the house. First she had to find a gap in the cameras. It

took a keen focus to see the camera movements from that distance but once she'd watched them both for a couple minutes she had their programmed sweeps down. As expected, there were brief periods when the right side of the house was not being recorded.

The sound of the garage door opening was Jan's cue to shift her attention back to the front of the house. A black Jaguar moved down the driveway and she focused the binoculars on the driver. Wearing a black tux with a bow tie, Marcus looked as sleek and powerful as his car. Jan's heart skipped a beat. It had been over a week since she'd been even this close to him. The memory of their encounter in his office was still a burning-hot ember in her mind. If she was honest with herself, it was also the reason she'd decided to undertake this stupid and completely personal venture. She wanted to see him again. Why else would she be sneaking into his house? It didn't matter to her that the information on her memory stick combined with a bit of research had exposed a first-class sneak inside Marcus Damon's inner circle. But it would matter to him. Which gave her an excellent excuse for dropping by, a perfect get-laid-and-stay-out-of-jail card.

Even at a distance Marcus was a sufficient distraction that Jan almost missed her window of opportunity. She was still clutching the binoculars as she made her dash toward the house. Once she was plastered against the shadowed wall she took time to smooth out her breathing and brush the leaves and dirt off her black clothing. Unless the overly pretentious neighbors happened to look out a window—and the windows were all dark so probably no one was home—she was relatively safe from being seen. Once she was calm Jan turned around and began to free climb. The old brick wall had enough small indentations for her fingers and toes to find purchase. She was up and squirming through the small bathroom window in no time. Piece of cake, she thought as she washed her hands at the sink.

* * * * *

"You seem distracted, darling."

Marcus lifted his gaze from silent auction item number forty-seven and looked at the woman standing next to him in the crowd. "Sorry. Work."

The pretty blue eyes looked sympathetic and she leaned against his arm. "Did you have a bad day?"

"Not bad. Just busy." Marcus realized he was talking in truncated sentences and knew he should make an attempt to improve his conversation. However he couldn't confess his frustration that the man he'd hired to find another woman was having no success. The private investigator had located where she'd been living in San Francisco but of course she'd already slipped away. And all the clues she'd dropped about her family and history were turning out to be dead ends. Marcus focused his mind on the second most pressing issue in his life instead, his attempts to build a legal fence around his genetic research. That he could safely talk to his date about. "I'm up to my eyeballs in patent law right now. I've spent far too much time this week listening to lawyers argue with lawyers and not getting the answers I need from any of them."

"Well, lawyers are awful people. But I'm sure you can hire the best." She smiled brightly up at him, as if she had just solved the whole problem. "So there's no need for you to worry, is there?"

Marcus tried to remember why he was on a date with Cindi Rossi, a local TV personality. She was slim, dark-haired and very pretty. She also did great thirty-second sound bites on almost any topic. However sustained, intelligent conversation seemed to be beyond her. Fuckable but dull. Just what he needed, Marcus told himself and gave her his best smile.

"No. Nothing to worry about." He gestured along the line of tables holding the items for the charity auction. "I must admit I have limited interest in spa certificates or perfumed baths. Was there anything you might enjoy?"

Her eyes sparkled with renewed interest. "Well...the earrings down there were very nice. You know, the sapphire ones?"

"The ones that match your eyes so perfectly? No, I hadn't noticed those," he teased.

It didn't offend him that she'd chosen one of the most expensive items up for bid. Women were attracted to his money, he knew that. Sharp features that included the ultimate Roman nose, courtesy of his Italian grandfather, did not make him the most photogenic man and his character tended toward curt and demanding rather than charming. Dates had been far harder to get in his college days. But a highly profitable company and expensive clothes made up for a lot of personal defects in a man. Now he could pick pretty women like Cindi off trees.

Still, it would be nice to have a woman respond to him as he really was. A bold woman, smart, proud and playing games that had nothing to do with attempting to marry a billionaire. Marcus had to smile at his own delusions as he bent down and wrote a ridiculously large sum on the sheet for the sapphire earrings. Cat wasn't trying to marry him but to rob him, which he supposed was a more honest way of getting hold of his money. But then she wasn't actually after his money either. She was getting paid by someone else to obtain something far more specific. Somehow he didn't think Cat gave a damn about wealth. He couldn't really understand why she did what she did but it was probably more for the challenge than for money. She'd had plenty of opportunity to steal money from him and his company but nothing was missing. A sweep of her computer had shown reams of entirely appropriate corporate data, a finished report for Dr. Matthews and a letter of resignation outlining her mythical uncle's illness, nothing else. Of course the data guys had said it was too clean so he should probably still be suspicious.

"Oh, listen. I think I hear the band starting up," Cindi said, clutching his hand.

"Well then, let's go dance, shall we?" Maybe it was the third martini kicking in but Marcus was suddenly in a mood to party. They'd drink and dance. He'd leave his car here and take a taxi home. Take Cindi and do what he wanted with her. See if she still liked him then. Although she'd probably be good at pretending, even if she didn't. One thing about Cat, her orgasms had been real, those shrieks had been torn right out of her

soul. Even if everything else had been pretense, he knew that she responded to him as a man.

An hour later the earrings were dutifully paid for and bestowed upon his date. Blue eyes glowed with happiness. Marcus pretended that they were hazel and kissed the woman in his arms.

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Jan opened her eyes in the dark room, momentarily not sure where she was. Then she heard a feminine giggle followed by a low, rumbling baritone. Time and place snapped back into focus. She was in Marcus Damon's house, lying on Marcus Damon's bed, and Marcus was back home...with a guest.

Jan bolted upright and looked desperately around the shadowy room. She must have fallen asleep while waiting for him. Turning to the bedside clock she saw that it was two a.m. Why the hell did he have to decide to bring a woman home with him tonight of all nights? Of course, she should have thought of that possibility. It was strange she hadn't considered it, especially given what she knew about Marcus. At some point in the last few months her careful rationality had clearly abandoned her, leaving her in a very sticky situation. Jan cursed under her breath. She glared at the dark hole that was the open door to a large walk-in closet and squelched the impulse to hide there. That simply would not work out well—listening in while Marcus fucked another woman would surely make her homicidal. No, not a good idea. Adding murder to her list of crimes is not what she'd hoped to gain by coming here tonight.

It's all or nothing, she thought to herself. With a small, tight grin, Jan pulled off her shirt and unhooked her bra then slipped under the sheets.

* * * * *

Marcus kissed Cindi again. She didn't smell right, didn't move right but he was beyond caring. It was a warm body, about the right size and shape, and he was going to

enjoy himself. He pressed her against the wall of the entranceway and pawed at her dress, exposing a pristine white lace bra.

"Slow down, Marcus, please," she said in a small voice.

"But I don't want to slow down. I want to fuck you. I want to make you scream. Do you scream when a man fucks you?"

"I-I can, if that's what you want."

The hesitant offer hit Marcus like a bucket of ice water. He pulled away. "No. I want you to do what feels right for you."

"I'm not normally the noisy type but I can try," she offered again.

He shook his head. Maybe bringing Cindi home was a mistake. Still, she was here and he couldn't very well throw her out now. "Can I get you anything? A liquor?"

She giggled. "I think I've had enough to drink. Where's your bedroom?"

"Up the stairs, last door to the right." Marcus did his best to smile in response to her coy question. However his ardor had been effectively doused and he wasn't sure if he could get it back. Damn, this was turning into an awkward night. Maybe he should just give up and stop trying to satisfy himself with pretty baubles that couldn't give him what he really wanted.

Cindi, oblivious to the dark thoughts swirling around in his head, leaned into him and rubbed her hands down his chest. "Then let's go to bed."

Marcus felt trapped as he walked up the stairs ahead of her and fumbled with the light in his room.

"Ow!" A sleepy-eyed dark head rose from his bed and a bare arm lifted to block the light. "Turn that off, would you, Marcus?"

"Cat?" His voice practically squeaked in surprise.

"Who's that?" Cindi blurted, from an area in the vicinity of his left elbow.

"Who the hell are you?" Cat snarled at the same time.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Cat was the first to recover from the shock. She clutched at the sheets and glanced from him to Cindi and back, looking every inch the injured party. "I got some unexpected time off and flew in to see you. You said I should visit, darling. I thought...when you told me the security codes... Well obviously I thought wrong." Her voice was smooth, just hinting at the potential for tears. It was a brilliant performance.

Cindi glared at him accusingly. "You have a girlfriend?"

"Cat can hardly be described as a girlfriend," he answered dryly. Now both women were glaring at him. Marcus ran a hand through his hair and looked from Cindi's wounded blue eyes to Cat's blazing hazel ones.

"Then get her out of here!" Cindi demanded with a pout.

Marcus locked stares with the woman in his bed and saw a slight quirk of a smile flicker over Cat's face. She was enjoying this. He stifled his answering smile. It was going to be a very interesting night.

Marcus turned to Cindi. "I'll call you a cab."

She stiffened but did not protest as he directed her toward the door. Marcus looked back over his shoulder before leaving the room and snapped, "And you, don't you dare go anywhere. You owe me an explanation for this...surprise visit."

"Yes, master." The words got tossed at his back in a darkly amused tone and his lips automatically twitched up in response.

Five minutes later Marcus was climbing the stairs in an even more conflicted state than before. He was angry, of course, at her breaking into his home. How the hell had she gotten around the security system? Even more disturbing was the question why she would do such a thing. He was at a complete loss as to her purpose. At least, none of the reasons his alcohol-befuddled brain could come up with made any sense in the real world. He was also, he had to admit, amused by her audacity at depositing herself in his bed and facing down his date. Finally, he had to admit that he was insanely pleased

to see her. Two weeks of futile hunting for any hints as to who she was or where she might be hiding only to have her show up in his house, it was too good to be true.

Cat was lying in his bed...lying naked in his bed. The desire that had fled him moments before flooded back, stronger than ever. His cock stiffened. He had every intention of pinning her to the silk sheets, regardless of his mental and emotional confusion. First, however, he would get some answers.

Marcus strode into the room scowling. "What the hell are you playing at, Cat?"

"I wanted to see you, is that so wrong?" Large, innocent eyes teased him with their lies.

He shook his head, more to get his own thoughts straight than to deny her statement. She could turn him to jelly with nothing more than a look.

Cat slipped out of the bed, a vision of nakedness, and crossed the room toward him. The pressure in his pants increased tenfold and his mind went blank. He wasn't up to this. Dealing with Cat clearly required a strong, sober mental state and he was way beyond that. With an act of enormous will, he brought his questions back into focus.

Marcus grabbed her shoulders and held her away from his body. "Why? Why break into my home?"

"Oh all right, if you insist, business first." She nodded toward a small envelope on the dresser. "I brought you a present. Not that you'll like what it tells you."

"Get to the point, damn it!" His control was breaking and soon he'd be dragging her toward him to devour those infuriating lips, taste that luscious mouth and ravage that gorgeous naked body. He shook his head again, trying in vain to clear it of her overwhelming presence.

"While I was working for you I discovered that someone else had hacked into your system," she continued calmly. "Not from the bottom up like I did, but starting at the innermost defenses. Being a curious and rather territorial animal, I did some investigating. The VP of Sales and Marketing at Damon Laboratories has an intense interest in your secret project, Marcus."

That got his attention. "Hugh? Hugh Brookman?" He'd never really liked the guy but he was good at his job.

"That's the man. And lately he's been putting feelers out in...unusual markets, shall we say?" Cat lifted both hands up to lay them on his arms. "You'd better stop him before he closes a deal to sell you out, darling. Now, can we please end the business portion of this meeting and move on to the pleasure?"

A single stroke of her hands and his elbows unlocked. She stepped inside his guard and he breathed in her scent. With a groan he wrapped his arms around her and bent his head. Her kiss tasted of fire and honey, her body melted into his in exactly the right way. There was no awkwardness, no sense of wrongness. She simply fit. A distant corner of his mind muttered about doubtful motivations and unlikely stories, about all the questions he still needed to ask, but he didn't listen.

His right hand ran down the slender, naked back and over the slight rise of her buttocks. Her mouth pressed up harder against his, as if she wanted to devour him, as if she were as hungry for him as he was for her. Marcus wanted to believe that, wanted it so badly that he knew he was far beyond all rational thought. He would risk anything to keep this strange, mysterious woman in his arms a little longer. He would even believe her crazy story and the beautiful lie that she was here to help him, that she cared enough about him to want to help.

* * * * *

Jan melted into the tight clasp of his arms and felt like singing with joy and triumph. Marcus had tossed his date out on her cute little ass. He hadn't even questioned why a professional thief would bring him information on an internal sneak. That might come later but later didn't matter. Right now it felt like she had taken a huge gamble and won. It was her mouth that he was attacking like a starved man and her ass that he was squeezing. She had been craving him like an addiction, needing to touch and taste him. Jan pulled away from the kiss so she could lick his lips, his cheek, his

chin. She nuzzled his neck and tasted him there too. God but he smelled wonderful, a faint earthy musk that was all his own.

She tugged off his bowtie and began to unbutton the white dress shirt, her mouth following the line of bared flesh. He groaned as she undid his belt and reached inside his trousers. She sank to her knees in front of him. His swollen cock twitched as she put her lips over it. A big hand pressed her head down and she took more of him into her mouth. She sucked and his fingers tightened in her hair. He pulled her head back and then shoved his cock deep into her mouth again. His obvious enjoyment of the blowjob made her wet with spiking desire.

“Damn you, Cat.” He ground the words out while continuing to plunge his cock into her mouth. “I should hate you. I should...but all I want to do is fuck your body in every possible way. I want to make you beg me to fuck you. I want to hear you scream again.”

Her pussy tightened in anticipation. She freed her mouth and looked up along the hard, lean lines of his body. “Then please fuck me, Marcus. I want to feel this glorious cock buried in my cunt.” Jan flicked her tongue along the ridge at the sensitive tip of his penis. “Please, I’ve wanted you so badly. I dream about you and wake up aching for your cock. Take me now, take me hard and rough.”

It was true, all of it. The game of begging had turned into reality. But he didn’t know that, couldn’t ever know that she wanted him as badly as he seemed to want her.

Marcus pulled away from her attentions and knelt down in front of her. He was still wearing his unbuttoned shirt and the pants were around his knees but he clearly had no intention of wasting time to fully undress. His hands directed her to turn. “Let me see your ass. Show me where you want this cock to go.”

Jan followed his instructions and put her face on the carpet, her backside sticking into the air. She reached back with both hands to pull her buttocks up and apart. “There. Please fuck me there.”

His thick rod speared into her and she grunted. Hands grabbed her waist and held her still as he impaled her again and again. Her whole body quivered and she mewled with need, wanting each hard thrust, wanting his punishing lust with a hunger that rose out of some primitive part of herself. She screamed as the orgasm tore through her.

Marcus was breathing fast but his hands slowly relaxed their hard grip on her waist. "Go lie down on the bed," he panted.

She slipped under the silk sheets. He finished undressing and followed, lying down next to her. He rested on one elbow and reached out to stroke her hair. Jan looked up at him questioningly. She had expected him to attack her with hard, demanding lust. This...this *tenderness* wasn't his usual mode of operation.

"I'm glad you dyed your hair brown again," he said.

She shrugged. "I didn't like the red much either."

Marcus leaned down and kissed her softly. He pulled back, looked into her eyes and then kissed her lightly again. Her puzzlement must have shown because the next time he lifted his head he smiled.

"You're a curious animal indeed, Cat. Tell me more about yourself."

She frowned. She knew that he wasn't finished yet and neither was she. One orgasm wasn't nearly enough, not with him. "I'd rather fuck than talk."

He grinned. His hand moved to her breast and tugged on a nipple. "Tell me something I might find interesting and maybe I'll give you what you want."

Jan thought about it while he played with her breast. Finally she offered, "I lost my virginity at sixteen to my dance instructor."

"What kind of dance? I can't imagine you doing ballet."

Distracted by the gentle nibbles on her breast, she answered him, "I started ballet when I was four. At eleven I switched to hip-hop—over my mother's strenuous objections."

"She didn't like hip-hop?" Marcus moved his hand across her belly and down between her thighs.

"Street trash music. That's what she called it." His finger rubbed her clit and she moved her legs farther apart to encourage him to continue with the pleasurable massage. Maybe he'd stop talking if she got him properly distracted.

"Was that your first act of rebellion?" he asked.

"I guess it was the first outward sign that I wasn't buying into the society girl role. I took up Kenpo when I was twelve. She really hit the roof with that one." Jan spread her legs even more and arched her back off the bed. He must be getting at least a little distracted by now. "Flower arranging. That was what she wanted me to take lessons in. Can you imagine that?"

"Kenpo Karate? That explains a lot." His hand was still moving in that slow, controlled, teasing way. "What about your dad? Did he support your interests?"

"I was daddy's little princess. I could do anything I wanted. Well, other than date. Even when I was fifteen." The heat in her pussy was growing to nearly intolerable levels and she wanted more than just his fingers. The words kept flowing, trying to give him what he wanted so he would give her what she needed in exchange. "He literally threw one boy out the door when he came to pick me up. Of course that just meant I learned how to climb down from my window."

Marcus smiled. "So the climbing thing is your way to get a date? Must admit it works for me." He removed his hand from her dripping wet cunt and cupped a breast instead. His head bent to tease a nipple with an expert tongue.

Jan squirmed. "Frustrated desire is a powerful motivator. You should keep that in mind." She wrapped an arm around his back. He sucked hard on her sensitive nipple. She moaned and ran her fingernails down his muscular shoulder. She was feeling very frustrated right now. Marcus was playing with her and if his intent was to drive her crazy, he was succeeding.

"Your dad was just protecting you from men...like me." His mouth landed on hers and he kissed her hard then pulled away.

She lifted her head to follow his retreating mouth but he held her shoulders against the pillow. The restraint was even more stimulating than the kiss had been. She snarled at him. "More likely from men like him. My dad would fuck anything that wore a skirt."

"He cheated on your mother?"

"On every possible occasion."

Marcus scowled. "And you hate him for that?"

"No, I love him. My mom hated him. Or I thought she hated him. I don't know. Unfortunately, she's dead so I can't ask her." Jan wasn't even sure what she was saying anymore. Her body was screaming for attention and Marcus was pulling away instead of giving her what she needed so badly from him.

"My mom died when I was a kid," Marcus said softly.

She had to ask. "How?"

"Breast cancer."

Jan sank back against the pillow, empathy pushing aside lust for a moment. "My mom committed suicide after my dad had a massive stroke."

"Poor Cat. How old were you?"

"Twenty-four. Not a kid anymore. How old were you?"

"Twelve."

"Poor Marcus." The words just slipped out. She hoped he didn't think she was mocking him with the mimicry. It really did make her sad to think of Marcus losing his mother. "Did your dad remarry?"

Marcus shook his head. "Not for a long time. He drank heavily for the first couple years. My sister took care of both of us, until she'd finally had enough and moved in

with the guy across the street. That shook my dad up enough to get him sober. It was nearly a year before she came home though. Laid down lots of conditions."

"Sounds like a tough cookie, your sister."

"She was."

"Was?"

"Died three years ago. We have a particularly virulent strain of breast cancer running through my family." He was silent for a moment then continued, "I'm still very close to my brother-in-law though and I have a nephew. Tyler is twelve and he's a great kid. I see a lot of my sister's determination and strength in him."

Jan closed her eyes. It was too much. This sharing. She didn't want to learn about his family, she certainly didn't want to feel this pain. What she wanted was to feel his fingers and his mouth and his cock. She opened her eyes and pulled his head down for a kiss. He responded with a sweet, melting passion. The roughness was gone and Jan wasn't sure she liked this new side of Marcus. Still the long, deep kiss was a whole lot better than talking.

Marcus shifted to lie on top of her. The missionary position had never been one of her favorites but Jan welcomed him by parting her thighs. When he began to move she was surprised by how good it felt. Having him pressing down on her, his mouth teasing hers while he moved inside her, was intensely intimate. She felt every nuance of his movement, heard his breath in her ear, felt the heat pouring out of his body. For the first time she felt cradled underneath a man instead of simply squashed.

Her climax was softer but in some ways even more powerful than before. It was a slowly cresting tidal wave of sensation that swept her gradually and inexorably away from everything that had gone before, her life, her pain, her confusion and need. For one brief moment she felt completely, blissfully happy. She clung to Marcus, her arms around his back, her legs entwined with his. The wave broke and she shut her eyes to hide the tears that threatened. She knew in that moment that she didn't want to let Marcus go. Not then. Not ever. Marcus held her close for a few more deep breaths then

he rolled off to the side. However, he moved so that her head lay on his shoulder and his arm still held her to his side.

There was a heavy silence. Jan dreaded the coming questions. She knew that her defenses were down. If he turned cold and threatening again she might not be able to stop herself from crying. She gulped in a breath and let it out slowly, shoring up defenses that were riddled with vulnerabilities. Another breath and still he remained silent. Waiting for Marcus to shift into interrogation mode was torture. Was this part of his game? Did he want her nerves stretched to the breaking point? Or was it possible that he was feeling as confused as she was? Maybe he didn't want the sweet intimacy of moments ago to slip away either. Jan prepared herself to face him, to lift her head from its comfortable resting spot and look Marcus in the eyes. His quiet snore caught her totally off guard.

She eased herself away from Marcus' warmth and looked down onto his sleeping face. Tracing the hard lines of his features with a gentle finger, she felt a tear sliding down her own cheek. He was such a good man and had been through so much. His research made sense now. She could understand why he was so driven to master genetic manipulation after losing both a mother and a sister to a tragic genetic flaw. Marcus deserved the best in life. He certainly deserved better than what she had done to him.

Jan eased herself out of the bed and began to dress. She needed to get as far away from him as possible. Coming here tonight had been an enormous mistake. She had gone too far with this particular game, bet too much and lost it all. Jan did up her shoes then glanced at the bed one last time. Resolutely she turned toward the window. If she stooped down to kiss him goodbye, she might not find the strength to leave.

There was no choice but to run away, find somewhere quiet and lick her wounds. Eventually it wouldn't hurt so much. At least that's what the advice columnists said. She wasn't sure she believed that, the emotions storming through her were so deep and strong. Jan admitted to herself that she was stupidly, madly in love with Dr. Marcus

Damon—her mark, the man she had been paid to steal information from, the man she had played for a fool. And when he figured that out, there had better be at least one state border between them.

Chapter Five

"Here, let me do that," Jan said and reached for the kettle.

The man nodded and stepped back to let her make the tea. Jan couldn't help but notice that his hair was almost completely white now. After nine years he had regained an amazing amount of movement and even halting speech. The stroke had nearly obliterated the Irish lilt from his words but sometimes she still caught echoes of it. The fine muscle control, however, would never come back and he still had trouble controlling his extremities, especially when something disturbed his daily routines. Her visits were always a disruption but Jan knew he looked forward to them. She poured tea into two large mugs and carried both over to the small table. He sat down and accepted a mug, looking at her questioningly.

"I have to go away for a while. A month, maybe two," she said and watched his face fall. "Sorry, Daddy. I really need to leave."

"W-what d-did you d-do this t-time?" he asked. Her father knew what she did for a living. He didn't approve, but neither did he lecture her about it. Probably because he couldn't get that many words out, especially when he was angry. Although the stroke and everything that followed had dulled his temperamental nature and made him a much more calm and forgiving person, he could still get angry about her risk-taking lifestyle.

"I stole something from a very powerful man and I'm afraid he's going to come after me."

"Sl-sloppy."

Jan nodded. "Yes, I got sloppy. I got too close to this one and trapped myself."

"Wh-why?"

"I guess because he's hard and demanding, arrogant and aggressive, but he's also brilliant and beautiful and decent. And he doesn't lose sight of what's really important. It stopped being a job and I stopped being careful." Jan sighed and stared into her tea. She wasn't sure exactly what her dad's question was really about but it offered an opportunity to unburden herself. It felt good to talk. She didn't have any real friends, a lot of acquaintances but not a single close friend to share these feelings with. There was no one she cared deeply about in her life, except for her father...and Marcus. "I fell in love. Stupid I know, but I couldn't help myself."

A large hand reached out to cover hers. "N-not st-stupid."

Jan lifted her head and smiled wearily at her dad. "Well it sure feels stupid from where I sit. That's the other reason I have to run away. I need to get my head on straight again."

He shook his head. "D-don't fight l-love. Too st-strong. J-just hurt yourself and the oth-ther p-person."

"Did you love Mom?" After a lifetime of wondering, Jan finally found the courage to ask.

Her dad nodded.

"Then why? Why all the other women?"

He gave a helpless little shrug. "We d-drove each oth-ther crazy. T-too young and p-proud. Th-then too busy and st-stupid to f-fix things."

Jan scowled at him. "It hurt her so much, what you did. And it hurt me too." He had the grace to look sad. She wanted more but knew that it was too big a topic for him to explain.

Jan took a gulp of tea and looked over his shoulder at the soothing cream-colored walls of the tiny kitchen. Her father's mistakes were made a long time ago. It was her own she needed to deal with. She stood and put her now empty cup on the counter. "If anyone comes asking, say you haven't seen me in weeks, okay? And I won't call. Not for a while at least."

Her dad came and gave her a tight hug. "L-love you," he whispered into her hair.

Jan sighed and laid her head on his chest for a moment. "I know. And I love you too, Daddy." She remembered the hard times nine years ago, when her world had fallen apart and she had feared she would lose him completely. It had been desperately hard to find the money to get him the medical care he needed. But the expensive rehabilitation program had worked and he was doing all right now. Jan looked up. "I'm quitting," she declared. "I'll find something else to do. Maybe I'll even go back to school."

Her dad smiled and hugged her again. "W-wonderful."

Jan felt an enormous sense of relief at her decision. She really was done with it. There was no longer any thrill in stealing secrets from wealthy businessmen, many of whom had been her father's compatriots and who had done far worse things than him. Hiding money from the IRS so he could pay off a former mistress who was blackmailing him had been supremely bad judgement, but it really didn't compare to knowingly sending defective products to the third world, breaking labor laws to take advantage of desperate immigrant workers or many of the other shady practices that she'd uncovered. It had burned her to watch those others thrive while the business her dad had spent his whole life building had been torn apart. Maybe if he'd been healthy he could have saved something but she'd never stood a chance and everything of value had been split between the government and the lawyers. There were still a lot of disreputable practices and people in the business world but she had to admit, since meeting Marcus Damon, that there were good people too. Her personal vendetta was over.

It was past time she stopped working at corporate espionage in any case, before her double life caught up with her. She'd gotten away with years of pretending that she'd rescued enough resources out of her dad's business to pay for an idle lifestyle, including spur-of-the-moment holidays that covered her sporadic criminal activity. Because she'd been careful to keep her real identity a secret from her contacts and

clients, it was possible for that side of her to quietly disappear. She needed one last clean escape and she could pick up the pieces of a real life again. She could have friends. Maybe even a boyfriend.

Except that the one man she truly wanted could never be hers. Marcus was the only person who could definitively tie her to any criminal activity, so he was the one person whom she had to stay away from. Besides, it wasn't as if he wanted anything to do with her, other than maybe get her locked away. Jan could only hope that he wasn't angry enough to track her down. There had been too much information disclosed at their last meeting that he could use to find her real identity. She had been such a fool. After so many years of being careful Marcus had turned her into a complete idiot. If that was what being in love did to a woman, she was glad she'd never experienced it before.

Jan left her father's apartment still weighed down with hurt and fear but with a stronger sense of purpose. She wasn't just running away to heal and hide, she was going to change her life. And she knew the perfect place to do it in. There were relatives on her mother's side that she hadn't seen since she was a child and a small village in Mexico was the ideal spot to lose an identity she no longer wanted and blur memories she couldn't afford to hang on to.

* * * * *

Marcus moved his hands off the desk and onto his lap so that the other man in the room couldn't see his fists clench. "You're sure she accessed and retrieved the information?"

"It's clear from the material she gave you that she spent a lot of time and effort getting intimately acquainted with the breach in our security barrier even if, as she claims, she didn't create it. There's no way to be a hundred percent sure what she did with that access but like the cops say, she had plenty of opportunity and motive."

Marcus stood and strode over to the window, presenting his back to Greg Simmons, Damon Laboratories' head of security and one of his oldest friends. "Then why the hell give me data that incriminates her?"

"It does seem strange. But she sounds like a pretty odd character in any case. I mean, you said she broke in to your house to give you the information. It would have been far more rational to mail it to you anonymously. Although why she would feel the need to help us in such a way..." Marcus heard Greg clear his throat before continuing. "Umm, was there anything more to your relationship? Any other reason...?"

"Why she wanted to see me in person, at my house? Probably just to rub in the fact that she could. And maybe that's why she gave me Hugh's head on a platter too. Just a twisted kind of power trip." Marcus hoped his voice didn't betray the depth of self-disgust he was feeling at that moment.

Greg probably guessed that Cat was the woman in New York. The security guards had reported that incident to him and Marcus had faced some pointed questioning. He'd said as little as possible in response. It was probably time to confess everything and get his friend's clearheaded take on things. But Marcus couldn't do it. He felt like such an idiot to have let her lead him by the balls like she did. He should have asked more questions, should have damn well had her arrested. But lying there with Cat in his arms, he had felt more at peace than he had for months. It had been so easy to just drift off to sleep. If he was completely honest with himself, Marcus knew that he hadn't wanted to confront her. Falling asleep had been a way of keeping his delusions intact for a few more precious hours. Until he'd read the data she'd left him and the suspicions had begun to form. Yet even now he was questioning the obvious, hoping for the impossible.

"I have someone looking for her," he said, turning around to face Greg. The information Jan had provided about her past had been enough for the private investigator to identify her. The Connollys had been a well-known family in L.A. and their descent through scandal and tragedy had made it into the public record. It

shouldn't be too hard to follow the leads that material provided and find where Jan Connolly was hiding now. His fist opened and closed again in a tight clench. He wanted to get his hands on her so badly his palms itched.

"I can give your description to the police and—" Greg offered.

"No. Not the police. I need to know exactly what information she sent to whom. That's critical. If she's arrested, chances are we'll never know." Maybe he was still making excuses but he needed to talk to her himself. "This stays between us until we know more. The man I've hired is sure he can find her."

Marcus could see the uncertainty in Greg's eyes.

"And when we find her, how are you planning to get her to confess?" Greg asked. "You said she's an expert liar so getting at the truth will be difficult."

Marcus smiled but only with his mouth. "Remember back in college, that mixture we came up with in bio-chem?"

"The drug that affects a person's self-control?" Greg looked shocked. "After what it did to Alice we swore we'd never use it again. We destroyed the formula."

"It's in my head. All I need to know is how you cooked it up—at what temperature and for how long. Sorry, Greg, that drug is exactly what I need." Marcus felt unhappy to go against his vows and even worse because he was making his friend a part of it. Alice had been Greg's girlfriend. Under the influence of that stupid drug she'd said a lot of things which probably went through most girls' minds but which they'd never be stupid enough to say. Greg had felt guilty as hell after testing their invention on Alice but he'd never been able to forgive her either. The bald, drugged confessions had ruined a wonderful relationship. In this case, maybe it could save one. Marcus was so angry he wanted to strangle Cat. Yet at the same time the anomalies in her behavior gave him a dim and desperate hope that maybe he was missing something. Maybe she wasn't the total calculating villain she appeared to be.

"I need to know," Marcus pleaded with his friend.

Greg nodded slowly. "I guess you do. I'll write down what I remember and send it to you."

They shared a long look and Marcus could see both the concern and understanding in his friend's eyes.

Greg sighed and changed the subject. "Nicole and the girls are looking forward to the company's spring picnic on Sunday. Emma wanted to know if your nephew was going to be there."

Greg's oldest daughter was also twelve and had developed a serious crush on Tyler. Marcus smiled with both relief and fondness. "Of course Tyler and my brother-in-law Richard are coming," he replied. "We look forward to seeing your family."

"Will you be bringing that attractive brunette?" Greg put the question out somewhat cautiously.

"No, I'm not seeing Cindi anymore," Marcus said dryly. "I've found we don't have much in common."

Greg shook his head. "You're too demanding. All those women and you can't find one to suit you?"

"Only in my dreams," Marcus replied. He turned to look out the window. "Only in my dreams," he repeated in a whisper after he heard the door shut softly behind Greg.

Jan Connolly was real, but Cat was most likely a creation of his own desperate desire for a woman who would truly suit him, a woman who would both challenge and adore him. A woman he could stand next to during the day and lie down beside every night. One who would make him think, make him laugh and make him as hard as a rock just with her scent. He shook his head at the crazy impulse that insisted on putting fiery almond-shaped hazel eyes in those pictures. Marcus had to admit that there was more than an edge of insanity in his longing for a professional hacker and thief to be the woman of his dreams.

It was time to let go of his obsession with Cat. All the hard evidence indicated that she wasn't at all suitable to play any significant role in his life, and most certainly not as

his wife. Even if he managed to catch her and got her to tell him exactly what she'd done with his research data—not to mention why she gave him that self-incriminating information in the first place—how could he ever trust her? Maybe if, after he explained the frightening potential of his research, she begged for forgiveness and volunteered to help to fix the mess she'd made, maybe he could accept that as a starting point for a relationship. Somehow he couldn't imagine Cat begging for anything—other than a good hard fuck. Was there enough moral fiber in her to even recognize that what she had done was wrong? If he explained the risks of passing along his genetic techniques to an individual or company corrupt enough to buy them on the black market, would she even care? The disturbing questions rattled around in his skull, churning up even more confusion. He could never love a heartless, immoral woman.

So why couldn't he give up the dream of having Cat in his life?

Chapter Six

The rain fell like fat silver coins, each drop landing in the already sizable puddles on the dirt road with a heavy plunk. The storm's hypnotic weave of water and the leaden beat of raindrops lulled Jan into a deep calm. Breathing out a long, slow sigh, she leaned even more heavily against the cool adobe brick of her great-aunt Lucinda's doorway.

Jan felt herself emptying out. Just like the sky was losing its store of silver, so the many little weights that had lain on her spirit these past two weeks were draining away. Regrets about her life. The bad luck she had forced into wrong turns. The anger she had used to fuel poor decisions and the fear that she had allowed to stamp her into place. She imagined all the dark thoughts of the past few weeks turning into a turgid liquid then draining from her body to pool on the ground and, following the slight slope of floor, running outside to join the clean rain and sinking into the accepting soil of Mexico.

Jan had known for some time that her life was full of all the wrong things. It was an exciting life, lived always on the edge with never too long a period between performances. She had kept busy with one fancy trick after another, most played for her high-paying clients but some just for herself. An adrenaline junkie, that's what she was. It was no wonder that meeting Marcus had been like doing a header into a cement truck. That man was solid in every sense of the word. His life was dedicated to helping people, his work produced actual miracles, his family was largely lost but it had defined him. Marcus was the complete opposite of her vacuous person. She was a firefly while he was an oak tree. But Jan'd had enough of flitting about.

Marcus made her want to give up her shadowy, insubstantial existence and become someone real again, to do something worthwhile. She could never share her life with

him, and while acknowledging that left a hollow ache in the pit of her soul, at least he could form the cornerstone from which she'd build her own small presence in the world. Using Marcus as her inspiration to live a better life made Jan feel a little less empty. A single candle had been lit in the clean, new space inside her.

She thought about her father and a second light beamed into existence. There was a deep bond of love between them, despite all the faults and failings they had both demonstrated. She would make her father proud of her. Exactly how Jan didn't yet know. She admitted to herself that she didn't have a lot of material to work with, an incomplete education and a closet full of expensive shoes pretty much summed up her achievements so far. But she was young and smart and her skills could certainly be applied in a lot of different ways. Going back to college and finally completing her medical degree was probably a good way to start.

Jan nodded at the rain, feeling like she had just reached an important conclusion after a long conversation with a trusted mentor. She felt more comfortable with herself, and more certain of her future, than she had since arriving in this village twelve days ago with nothing except her passport and a small backpack of clothing. She hadn't even brought her cell phone, let alone a laptop. The nearest internet connection was a two-hour bus ride away. It had felt extremely isolating at first. But it forced her to slow down and finally take stock of all the nagging thoughts and pressures inside herself.

Footsteps approaching from behind reminded her that she was far from alone in the large ramshackle hacienda.

"Come have coffee and cake with us." The invitation was made in Spanish.

She looked over her shoulder and nodded. Pedro's white smile cut through the dim light of the house's interior. But then she turned back to face the outside, still enraptured by the rain and unable to pull herself away from the peace it offered.

He lay a gentle hand on her shoulder and gave her a little shake. "We need caffeine and sugar to put some life into a dull day like today, no?"

"But it isn't dull. It's beautiful...and soothing," Jan replied in Spanish, smiling up into his friendly brown eyes. Pedro was ten years younger than her. Too tall and gangly to be called handsome but he had a boyish charm that could melt stone. She liked him enormously.

She liked all her relatives, even her dour old great-aunt and taciturn great-uncle. Her Mexican kin had accepted her into their homes and hearts like the twenty-odd missing years had never existed. They talked to her as if her skinny twelve-year-old self had been dashing around the village only yesterday, mixing together anecdotes from the past and present as if time were a fluid thing that could be bent and twisted like a slender piece of grass.

Even better, the old women of the village told stories about when her mother had been the wild American girl who flitted in and out of their lives. Jan had not felt so close to her mother in decades. The angry, demanding woman who had tried so hard to mold her daughter into a polished society girl, who had seemed to relish the constant screaming fights with her father and then been broken by his silence, that woman was never in Mexico. Here she had been a laughing, mischievous child and then a willful, independent teenager and, finally, an American beauty queen with a degree in chemistry from Caltech. Her mother was still idolized by many in this small town. To them she was the combined Mexican/American dream—the smart, beautiful girl who achieved her own success and then married a wealthy man. Perhaps that was why she stopped coming, Jan thought, too many expectations to live up to and too many failures to hide. Rediscovering all her relatives, including her mother, had been another gift of this trip.

"Churros," Pedro whispered into her ear.

Jan laughed and turned to push Pedro back into the house. The skinny Mexican donuts were a well-known weakness of hers, especially when filled with a sweet, sticky strawberry sauce. "Hurry then, before your cousins eat them all."

With a last, lingering glance at the rain, she followed Pedro into the dark corridor and rejoined the rest of the family with a lighter heart than she had carried in years.

They stepped into the loud babble of a dozen people crowded into a kitchen that would be cozy with only a handful. While Jan's grandmother had run off to America, married a surfer boy and had one child, her younger sister Lucinda had stayed in the village and had many children with a down-to-earth local man. Several of their brood had moved away, scattered around Mexico to find work, but there were still plenty of relatives to fill the old family home. Lucinda's two sons, their wives and children remained in the house, as well as several other grandchildren on a seemingly rotating basis. Pedro was one of the more fixed residents and, like all the other young people in the room, was Lucinda's grandchild and Jan's second cousin.

"He's creepy, I tell you," said a young woman in Spanish, flicking too-long bangs off her face. "Nice looking and talks smooth but there's something about him..."

"Just another tourist looking for the 'real' Mexico." Pedro shrugged, minimizing his sister Maria's concerns.

"Humf, one of *those* tourists," Aunt Lucinda declared, "looking for a Mexican girlfriend—a young Mexican girlfriend. Stay away from him, Sascha." The last was said with a stern finger pointed at a delicate teen who was busy rolling hot churros in cinnamon sugar.

"Maria's right, he's creepy. And he's old," said the girl, rolling her eyes for emphasis. "Why would I go anywhere near him?"

"Because you are a curious, trouble-seeking girl," Aunt Lucinda admonished. "So for once, listen to your elders and avoid this particular piece of trouble. You are too pretty for your own good."

Sascha grinned at the compliment, completely ignoring the negative comments.

"Who has stirred up so much interest?" Jan asked.

"A gringo with a big smile and lots of money who wandered into our lowly village two days ago," Pedro answered. "I've spoken to him a bit at Ernie's bar. I think he's just

trying to find an authentic Mexican experience. You know the type. But who knows, maybe he also wants a girlfriend. Should I introduce you, Jan?" His eyes teased her.

"Is he good-looking?" Jan asked of Maria. "And not too old for an old woman like me?"

"You aren't old!" Sascha shouted. The young teen had attached herself to Jan soon after she arrived and clearly idolized her American cousin.

Maria shrugged. "Not too bad. Not too old. But he gives me the creeps," she repeated. "Pedro, keep him away from the family. You should probably stay away from him too."

"He's harmless. At least where I'm concerned. And I promised to show him the old mine tomorrow." Pedro wouldn't be persuaded, at least not without pressure from any of the elders in the room. So far at least they seemed unconcerned about the young man's potential plight, leaving Maria in an unwinnable position. Knowing how the household functioned, Pedro's sister stopped her complaints but the look she shot him made it clear that she did not approve.

Mention of the abandoned silver mine turned the talk in the room to reminiscences of the time when the mine was still functioning back in the 1950s. Everyone sipped the hot, strong coffee and ate churros until they were stuffed. Then it was time to start preparing dinner. This was also a busy life, in its way.

* * * * *

The next morning the sun had returned with a washed-clean brightness that made it all the more glorious. Jan stretched as she stared out of her bedroom window. She had a tiny attic room with a single bed, an old wooden chair and a floor lamp left over from the psychedelic sixties. Her mother had brought the lamp with her from California when she stayed here as a teenager. Jan felt warmed by that lamp, and the fact that her Aunt Lucinda had kept it all these years. Quickly dressing in faded red cotton shorts and a new "Viva Mexico" t-shirt, she ran down the stairs, eager to start the day.

Pedro was in the kitchen, making tortilla wraps out of yesterday's leftover chicken, beans and rice.

"Chicken for breakfast?" she asked.

"No. I told the gringo I'd provide a real Mexican lunch for our hike," he replied.

"Oh right. The old mine." Jan grabbed a tortilla from the stack and filled it with rice. It would do for an instant breakfast. "I've never been. Can I come?"

He hesitated. "Maria said to keep him away from the family."

"Sascha certainly. But I'm not a target for pervs looking for young girls, if that's what he is. Besides, I'll have you to watch out for me." She grinned at her cousin, willing to let him think he could protect her better than she could herself. "Come on, it is gorgeous out and I really, really want to go on this hike. Maybe I'll just follow you anyway."

Pedro snorted but continued making tortilla wraps. "You would too. So you might as well be where I can see you. Go get six water bottles from the fridge. And bring your own pack. I'll carry his lunch because he's paying me but you can carry your own stuff."

Jan ran back up the stairs for her small backpack and a straw hat. They were ready to go in less than ten minutes.

"What's his name?" she asked as they headed over to Ernie's guesthouse-slash-bar-slash-restaurant. It was the only place in town where you could rent a room and the only bar with a functioning television set. Sometimes Ernie even got soccer games on pay-per-view and then every single male over the age of ten would be hanging around his place and many of the women too.

"Jake. Jake Forman," Pedro replied.

"How completely bland and all-American."

"He's willing to pay in US dollars for a local tour guide. That's all I care about." Pedro was saving up for scooter. He worked in a shoe factory when he could get a shift

but the two-hour meandering bus ride made it hard for him to do last minute fill-ins, which was all he had seniority for as yet. His own wheels could get him there in forty-five minutes.

"Squeeze him for all he's worth then," Jan egged her cousin on cheerfully. "Maybe he'd like to see the ancient, secret burial grounds or something."

Pedro shot her a questioning look. "There are no ancient, secret burial grounds."

"So. He doesn't know that. How's his Spanish, by the way?"

"Bad. Basic tourist stuff, not much more."

"Excellent. You can tell him all kinds of stories then. I'll help. How about if we say the burial ground is in the hill caves to the north? Or maybe those should be sacred ritual sites? You know, where the boys used to go to be turned into men."

"Cousin, you have a good imagination but I don't think it would be a good idea to lie to this guy."

"Why not? He'll be gone in a few days. Chances are he'll never know."

Pedro shook his head, his expression uncharacteristically serious. "I don't agree with Maria or Aunt Lucinda, I don't think he's a perv. But there is something dangerous about this guy and it wouldn't be worth it to try to squeeze money out of him with lies."

They had arrived at Ernie's and there was no time for a rebuttal as a middle-aged white man was already standing in the doorway looking toward them. Jan's good humor felt a bit dampened by Pedro's caution but she decided to drop the matter and simply enjoy the day's hike.

"Jake, this is my cousin, Jan Connolly. She would like to join us for the day, if you do not mind." Pedro's English was a bit formal but fully functional.

Jake's blue eyes had been scanning her and seemed to light up at her name. "Another American?"

Jan nodded. "I'm visiting my mother's relatives but I'm from California. You?"

"Oakland." He smiled and Jan had to admit it was a very nice smile. "I would be very happy to have your company for the day. Two guides for the price of one."

"I wouldn't be much of a guide," Jan admitted. "Don't come here often enough. And I've never been to the old mining site. Which is why I wanted to crash this outing."

"Then we both benefit from Pedro's knowledge. Did you want to come inside for a drink first? Perhaps coffee? Eddie makes wonderful coffee," he offered graciously.

"No, we should start walking," Pedro replied. "It is a good two hours, and much of it uphill. I would like to get there before noon so we can have lunch and rest in the shade during the hottest hours. It will be a scorcher today, I'm afraid."

"Fine. Yes, that makes sense. I just have one phone call to make and I'll be right back," Jake said. He couldn't seem to stop smiling at her.

Jan turned to Pedro as soon as Jake disappeared inside. "Is he always in such a good mood?"

Pedro shrugged. "Not really. Guess he likes you."

"Not a perv then."

"At least not one looking for underage girls," Pedro replied with a teasing, sideways look.

Jake was back outside in less than five minutes, still grinning. Maybe he really was that enthusiastic about Mexican history but Jan definitely got the sense that he was more than a little happy to see her. No reason he shouldn't be, she was an attractive young woman after all.

As they walked, Jake stayed beside her, pointing out plants, tracks in the mud, a bird's bright call. He was always asking questions. Usually it was Pedro who stopped, turned around and answered. Jan's knowledge of the local flora and fauna was sadly limited. She could tell by Pedro's increasingly curt answers that he felt they were going too slowly. After an hour the trail was curving around the bottom of the mountain but they still hadn't started the serious climbing portion of the hike.

"See there," Pedro pointed ahead, "in about a hundred yards we will turn onto the mine road. It is in rough shape but still drivable with a 4x4. Perhaps we should have rented one." He sounded disheartened and a bit worried. At this rate it would take them well into the afternoon to get to the mine site. Clearly he wasn't looking forward to making the long, sweaty climb at a snail's pace and during the hottest part of the day.

Jan peered around his shoulder to see where the village trail intersected the abandoned mine road. That was where the hard part of the hike would begin.

"We should probably pick up the pace," she said pointedly to Jake. "I'd sure like to hit those caves before the full heat of midday."

"Yes, of course," he said and stopped to pull a water bottle out of the small pack he had brought. He didn't seem to be able to keep himself from looking around in all directions with avid curiosity. Jake reached into his pack again and Jan groaned inwardly. Probably the camera again, she thought, having been through several picture taking sessions already. The man insisted on photographing everything, even cracks in the hardened mud.

Jake's broad smile over the muzzle of a gun took her completely by surprise. A quiet thunk and sharp prick made her look down. There was a dart stuck in her thigh.

"What the... Pedro, watch out!" She jumped forward, intending to bring Jake down, but her legs crumpled. Jan hit the dirt, her eyes still open but with no control over her body.

"Jan! Jake! What's going on?" Pedro sounded panicked but she could only see his feet from where she lay.

"Sorry, amigo, this is as far as we go today," Jake answered calmly.

Pedro's body slowly collapsed as he joined her on the ground.

A whistle sounded over her head and Jan heard an engine start. A vehicle had been parked somewhere close by. A door opened and closed, the engine still running.

"Let's get them loaded into the back of the Jeep," Jake was saying. "I'll take you to your car and you can dispose of the boy somewhere he won't be found for a while."

"Why not just leave him here?" another male voice asked with a heavy Spanish accent.

"Because I don't want him dead!" Jake snapped back. "Find a safe spot where he can sleep for the day."

"Okay, okay. I'll douse him with some booze and drag him into a cheap motel the next town over. Tell them he passed out on the street in front of me."

"Good, do that. And don't rob him either. I paid you enough for this job. I'll cover the cost of the motel room." Jake was picking her up as he answered his assistant. She closed her eyes so he'd think she was unconscious instead of just numb.

She was put in the backseat, slouching over and with her head resting on Pedro's shoulder. His breathing was slow but steady. It was a relief to know that they didn't mean to hurt her cousin. He should be able to get out of this without anything worse than a headache and a missing wallet—if Jake's hired man didn't take it, someone at the motel probably would. Still, far worse things could have happened to him, maybe like whatever Jake had in mind for her. A leaden fear filled her belly but the drugs were far enough into her system that she couldn't fully react with the proper amount of panic. The jostling of the car as they drove along the rough road eroded her last resistance to the tranquilizer and she fell asleep.

* * * * *

"Wake up, Jan." Someone was shaking her. "Come on. You need to drink some water."

He didn't sound mean or angry, it was a concerned voice really. She dared to drag her eyelids open. A man's face swam into view, haloed by the car's overhead lights. She blinked and her focus improved. Jake smiled at her from the driver's side of the Jeep.

"Why? What do you want with me?" She had meant the questions to come out as demands but a hoarse whisper was all she could manage.

He handed her an open water bottle. She took it and gulped down the lukewarm liquid thirstily. If it was drugged then so be it. She was too thirsty to care.

"Someone wants to talk to you." He partially answered her question.

"Talk? Who?" She finished the bottle and he handed her a granola bar. She tore it open, amazed at how hungry she was. How long had she been out?

"Don't know why." He shrugged. "Can't tell you who."

"Then what does he look like?" Jan pressed for more information.

Jake shook his head, refusing to answer. "Do you need to go pee?" he asked instead.

The words triggered an instant awareness of her full bladder. "Yeah." She looked out the front passenger window. It was night but the moon was nearly full and offered enough light that she could make out tall grass, the shape of trees in the distance and a long, narrow highway. There were no houses, no streetlights. "Where are we?"

"California," he answered.

"We crossed the border?" Her voice rose in surprise.

"Yep. No problems. Had a passport for you and told them you were my girlfriend. Said you did a bit too much partying on your last night in Mexico. Guess they see that often enough."

That was probably true, Jan thought, but she was nevertheless surprised that he had managed to get her unconscious body out of Mexico so easily. She lifted a leg and shook it, still feeling a bit numb. Jake walked around the car and held open the door for her.

She glared up at his grin then stumbled a few paces away from the car. There were no buildings in sight so obviously he expected her to pee on the side of the road. Her aching bladder didn't leave her much choice.

"Turn around," she snapped and undid her shorts. When she straightened he turned back to face her and she found herself staring into the muzzle of the tranquilizer gun again.

"Oh come on," she whined. "Let me stay awake from here on. Please? I promise to behave." She was already moving to take him out but the prick on her shoulder hit in any case. The hand she had wrapped around his wrist was losing strength and she knew it was a lost cause.

Jake smiled, a little sadly it seemed. "Sorry, but I was warned about you. Too dangerous to let you stay conscious."

He heaved her back inside the car and did up her seat belt for her.

"How long does it last?" she asked sleepily. The drug seemed to be hitting much faster this time, probably because she still had the previous dose lingering in her system.

"You were out fourteen hours with the first hit. Probably be longer this time," he answered. "Sorry about that, but I have my orders."

Jan sighed and let herself sink into nothingness. It was Marcus, she just knew. Part of her was worried but another part was strangely happy. Next time she woke up she'd see him again. He was probably angry. But at least she'd see him again.

* * * * *

A sharp jab in her left arm woke her. Jan shook her head, trying to clear out the fuzziness. Everything started spinning alarmingly around her and she closed her eyes. When it seemed safe to do so, she opened them again carefully. The room was small and bare. There was just her cot and a single chair, occupied by none other than a glowering Marcus Damon, dressed in a finely tailored dark blue business suit.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"In the basement of one of my office towers. Not many people know this room exists and I have the only key." The statement was obviously meant to be threatening but she felt strangely calm.

"So I'm your captive, is that it? Fair maiden guarded by a dragon." She stood up, intending to try for the door but her legs gave out before she'd taken two steps. Marcus caught her. She leaned into him, enjoying the feel of crisp white cotton against her cheek and the strength of his arms around her. "Boy, you sure know how to make a girl weak at the knees." She tilted her head back to give him a silly grin. "What did you inject me with? More tranquilizer?"

"No. And you've been sleeping more or less normally for the last few hours. Don't you remember waking up to drink and eat? A nurse was here."

She dimly recalled food and a woman helping her get to the bathroom. The woman hadn't been wearing a uniform though. It seemed unfair of Marcus to expect her to know that she was a nurse. Jan felt the need to explain it to him. "She wasn't dressed like a nurse so how was I supposed to know she's a nurse?" He looked at her kind of funny.

Jan remembered the pinprick and returned to the key question. "What was in the syringe?"

"Truth serum," he answered with a tight smile.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. A friend and I invented it at college." His expression told her he wasn't joking. "It'll wear off in a few hours. Or I can give you something to counteract the effects. As soon as you tell me where you sent my research data."

She lifted a hand off his shoulder to wave it nonchalantly and almost sank to the floor again as the dizziness hit her. Marcus held her up. Damn but this was wicked stuff. Worse than being drunk on tequila. "Doesn't matter," she mumbled through the nausea.

"It matters a great deal, Cat. Do you have any idea what you've done? What purposes my research could be put toward? And it's been more than two months since you stole that information—two months for some unethical person to figure out a way to use it."

"You can't keep it secret forever, you know. What then?" she asked, letting her head rest against his chest. She was still so sleepy.

"I only need a year, maybe less. I've got international patents in the works that will tie up the use of my research by anyone other than Damon Laboratories into massive legal knots. I'm also pushing hard for strict regulation of all genetic modification techniques. Neither will work, of course, if some truly evil person gets a hold of my work but it should keep the corporate competitors in line. Which is why you have to tell me who hired you."

"Don't worry your pretty head about it, Marcus." She snuggled more tightly against his warm, solid body. "Can we lie down now? I really don't think I can stand for much longer."

He scooped her up and deposited her carefully on the cot then sat on the mattress and glared down at her. "You don't know what you've sent out there. The rest of them, they call it genetic engineering but they're still trying to build houses with bulldozers, pushing the dirt around to make a hovel here and there. My research gives us real tools, craftsmen's tools, the ability to put up walls and windows and doors exactly where we want them. I mean, we haven't inventoried all the building materials yet, figured out the qualities of every piece and how they fit together but the tools are there. Soon we'll be able to build any living thing, perfect people...or perfect horrors." His expression was serious as he tried to convince her of what she already knew. "Even with what I've discovered so far, there is too much possibility for abuse. Imagine some fanatic being given the tools to tailor-make genetic diseases—something terrible that would only target Hispanics, or hazel-eyed women. I don't even trust our government with this stuff let alone whoever bought it on the black market."

Marcus looked so distressed she reached up and patted his cheek. "It's okay. Really."

"No, it's not okay. Damn it, Cat. Where did you send it?" He gripped her shoulders hard and shook her. The nausea hit like a hurricane and she began to gag. Marcus stopped shaking her and stood up abruptly. He paced the few short steps to the other side of the cell and back. "I don't like hurting you but I will do what is necessary to stop this. Who hired you?"

She groaned and pulled herself into a tight ball. "I...don't...know...who," she panted. After a few seconds her world stabilized enough so she could continue. "But you don't have to do anything. I changed the information, slipped in some mistakes. They'll decide your research is bogus."

"What? You changed my data?" Surprise made his voice even sharper.

Her stomach was settling down again and she dared to open her eyes. "I didn't like it either when I read your stuff so I tweaked it. Made a few minor changes before I submitted it. My clients were pretty sure you were on the wrong track and the information I gave them will confirm that."

Marcus stared at her with those piercing dark eyes. He'd dropped his jacket over the back of the chair and loosened his tie. "Are you saying you understood my work well enough to...to undermine it?"

She rolled onto her back and shrugged weakly. "I got as far as fourth year med school before deciding to switch career paths. It wasn't totally Greek to me. Harnessing the body's own cleanup crew to do genetic modifications. Brilliant. Truly brilliant."

He frowned instead of smiling like he was supposed to. Damn it, she had just complimented him. Couldn't the guy take a compliment?

"Switch career paths? Corporate espionage is a career choice?" he asked.

"The hours suck but the pay is good." She giggled.

"Stop being flippant, Jan Connolly," he snapped.

It was the first time he had used her real name and it sounded wrong coming from him, especially in that tone of voice. "You can call me Cat," she told him. "I've decided I like it. Just not kitten. Don't ever call me kitten. I hate being called kitten."

"How did you end up doing...what you do?"

"I sort of fell into it." Jan remembered quite literally falling onto her mentor when she'd caught the guy climbing around on the roof of her house. The roof had always been her favorite place to sit and think and she'd done a lot of that after her mother's death. "I needed money to help my pay for my dad's medical bills and this presented itself. It suited me at the time. Lots of anger to deal with. Maybe a bit of a death wish too."

Marcus was watching her face very carefully. "And does it still suit you?"

"No. I already decided to quit so you can stop glaring at me."

"Good." Marcus ran a hand through his already messy hair and sank down into the chair. He looked uncertain. "You really think you threw whoever-it-is off the scent?"

"Positive. They're arrogant SOBs and will be more than happy to test your so-called findings and 'prove' that you're running madly down the wrong track."

He frowned and shook his head. "I find it hard to believe you understand my research that well."

Jan glared at him. "Look mister smarty-pants, I understand plenty. You said your family carries a particularly virulent strain of breast cancer, which tells me it was probably linked to a mutation of the BRCA1 gene. That gene is heavily involved in DNA damage repair and from studying it you figured out how to manipulate the enzymatic response that underlies normal gene self-repair pathways. Combining that with the fantastic new research in zinc finger nucleases being done by your staff, you worked out a way to do targeted genome editing. Basically forced genetic mutation, only not in test tubes but directly in people. Scary stuff, gave me the chills. So I changed the protein factors as well as tweaking the lab results to show slight off-target cleavage

events. I also took out some important chunks of info so it'll look like a promising avenue that, after a bit more follow-through, will prove to be unfruitful."

Marcus looked slightly stunned by her drop into jargon-speak. She grinned up at him, feeling inordinately pleased with herself. She'd worked like a dog for weeks, studying his data and researching gene self-repair in order to pull it off. "Did I do good?"

"You did very good," he agreed. "But I'd still like to know who paid you."

"I don't know their names or who they work for. Honestly, or I'd tell you."

He nodded, accepting her answer. "Okay. One last question, why did you bring that information to my house?"

Jan giggled. "Because it was my get-laid-and-stay-out-of-jail-free-card."

Marcus' face became shuttered. "You just wanted to get laid?"

Jan smiled up into his beautiful eyes. "Of course not. I wanted to see you. I love you." The shocked look that fell over his face made her frown. "Did I just say that out loud? Jesus, this is some drug you gave me. Now I'm delusional." She turned away from him and shut her eyes, clutching the gray utility blanket tightly. She would not cry. One stupid move did not deserve another. If only she could get this fucking drug out of her system and think straight again. It wasn't fair, facing him in this condition.

"Jan? Cat?"

She shook her head, refusing to look at him, and almost gagged with rising bile again.

"Here, this will help. A few minutes and you'll be on your feet." She felt him push up her sleeve and the sharp bite of the needle as it sank into her flesh.

"Go away," she said and it came out like a thin wail. "Leave me alone."

"I can't. You'd get lost trying to find your way out of here."

"I'll manage. I'm good at getting out of difficult places."

"Yes, you are." A big hand was gently stroking her hair. "You're damn good at getting into them too. Even locked, barred places that I believed were safe from intrusion." There was a strange wistful tone to his voice that made her think he was not talking about computer networks. She turned her head and gazed up at him. He was smiling. Marcus continued, "We'll need to come up with a better story of how we met, don't you think? Something we can tell the family."

"Huh? My dad knows what I do and I don't have any other family."

He shook his head. "I meant our family. You do want kids, don't you?"

"Kids? Sure, in a few years."

"Then it's settled." He bent his head and kissed her gently on the lips.

She pushed him away and sat up. Her brain cells were starting to fire on all synapses again. "Whoa, what just happened here?"

"You just agreed to marry me and bear my children."

"I did not. And anything I said a few minutes ago cannot be relied upon because I was not lucid."

"You were perfectly lucid. Just less well-defended than usual."

Jan stood up and went to the door. It opened when she turned the doorknob. Better yet, her legs seemed to be working properly again. Marcus rose and pushed the door shut, leaning his bulk against it.

"We're not quite done here yet," he said and reached out to cup her face in his hands. "Will you marry me, Jan Connolly, hereafter to be referred to as Cat?"

"Marcus, you're one hot property." She ran a hesitant hand down his chest and admired the way his white shirt lay against the curves of muscle underneath. It was surreal, waking in this cell, the drugged interrogation and now stroking him and thinking about his absolutely astonishing question. It could not translate into the real world. "You have no possible reason to marry someone like me."

"I can give you at least ten good reasons to marry someone exactly like you."

She tilted her head and shot him a sharp, quizzical look. He sounded so certain.

"That look, for instance," he said. "I can think of no better way of communicating the traditional wifely message of 'honey, have you lost your mind?'. So that's number one."

He ran a finger down her cheek and she had to smile even as she shook her head. The hand dropped down to rest against the swell of her breast. His thumb brushed lightly across her nipple and it obediently stiffened and poked against her t-shirt.

"Actually it's probably further down on the list," he continued, "because number one has got to be the fact that no one else makes me as horny just by standing next to me as you do. Number two could be those adorable dimples on your ass. Three is that delicious, dangerous edge to your personality. I don't think I'll ever feel completely safe around you."

"Of course you'd be safe with me," she scoffed.

"I am beginning to believe that I will be safe with you, yes. But safe *from* you? No, never." He wasn't smiling as he pointed out the distinction. It seemed terribly important to him although she really didn't understand why.

Marcus went on with his list. "Number four is the fact that you're the smartest woman I've ever met."

"You've been going to the wrong conferences," she said brightly but her belly was fluttering and her insides were turning to mush. It was possible, just barely possible, that Marcus really did want to marry her. Obviously her body was starting to believe it, even if her head refused to grasp the concept. "Try something in the legal field. I'm sure there are female lawyers who can think rings around you."

Marcus pressed her against the door and ran both hands possessively over her hips, ending with a firm grip on her buttocks. "But the only one that has ever made me think about rings is you," he breathed into her ear. "So, sapphires or diamonds on your engagement ring?" His tongue brushed the edge of her ear and teeth nibbled on her

earlobe. She shivered. It felt unbelievably delicious to be the focus of his attention. Her resistance was melting away.

"Give me one more reason," she said quietly.

"Because I don't care what you've done or who you are, I just want to fuck you forever," he stated. The words were familiar, echoing what he had said on their first, magical night together.

She put her arms around him and kissed his hungry mouth, answering his thrusting tongue with her own. It was several minutes before she pulled back. "I don't care anymore either," she said, and this time it was true.

"Then say you'll marry me," he insisted, his eyes looking deeply into hers.

"Yes, I'll marry you." She blinked. It broke Marcus' mesmerizing gaze but no other spell was unraveled. He was still there, the room stayed solid and utilitarian, the ground didn't open up and swallow her and no monsters appeared. Maybe she wasn't hallucinating after all.

The lips kissing her and the hands fumbling at her zipper certainly seemed real. She wriggled to help him lower her shorts. As she pulled off her t-shirt, his head was already bending to devour a breast. His mouth nudged aside her bra so his tongue could flick over her right nipple. Pleasure shot through her and she tightened her grip on his shoulders. One hand rose to sink into his curls. She loved the feel of his thick waves between her fingers. She loved his big hands cupping her ass. She loved the inarticulate noises he was making as he nuzzled her breast. She loved Marcus and everything about his hard, strong body and brilliant mind. The miracle was that he loved her too, was sure enough of his love to offer her an engagement ring.

"Can I have both?" she asked.

He lifted his head to stare blankly at her. "Both?"

"Diamonds *and* sapphires," she explained, with extraordinary patience. Even the smartest guy seemed to be able to think about only one thing at a time.

Marcus smiled and dropped a kiss on her forehead. "You can have any color and size rock you want. As many as you want." He lowered his mouth to next to her ear and whispered, "But first you have to play my game, by my rules."

A shiver went through her. "What do you want, master?" she asked calmly, even as wet, hot anticipation turned her knees to butter. It occurred to her that it was a good thing she could control her visible reactions so well, acting normal while her insides turned to jelly would likely be a common occurrence during their relationship.

"I want you to finish undressing." Marcus straightened and started undoing his trousers. He pulled them down just enough so his long, hard penis was free to stand erect. He sat on the chair and grinned wickedly at her. "Then come sit on my lap, little Cat."

She did as instructed and straddled him, lowering herself down over his eager cock. The feel of the thick head pushing into her vagina, then the long, throbbing shaft slowing filling her, made her moan with longing. "Take control, Marcus. Fuck me hard," she begged.

The hands on her hips tightened their grip while his hips lifted to push his cock as deep into her as possible. Then he lifted her up, only to bring her down hard and fast, impaling her on his rigid cock. Over and over she rose and fell, riding him like a wild woman. Waves of ecstasy rolled through her. The pleasure grew to an almost unbearable level, until her whole body was aching for release. Marcus caught a nipple in his mouth and sucked. The added sensation sent her flying over the edge into a shattering orgasm. She screamed and her nails bit into Marcus' shoulder.

He pulled her down onto his lap one last time and, panting, held still. She wiggled a little, just to tease him, and he grunted at her. "Give me a second, Cat. The game isn't over yet."

She started undoing the buttons on his shirt. "Can you be naked for the next part?"

"Do I have a choice?" he asked.

"Not really," she replied and eased the shirt off his shoulders. There were indeed red indents where her fingers had tightened earlier. She kissed each mark lightly in apology. "Did I hurt you?"

Marcus chuckled. "I'm not feeling any pain at the moment. Quite the opposite, I'd say."

"Still, I should make it up to you," she replied and lifted herself off his lap. "What should I do for you in payment, master?" She licked her lips suggestively and looked down at his still-hard penis.

"Help me undress," Marcus said, slipping his pants down to his knees.

Jan knelt on the floor and obediently began to undo his shoelaces. She pulled off one fine leather dress shoe then the other, followed by his socks and then finished removing his pants and underwear. As soon as he was properly naked Marcus leaned back in the chair and spread his legs wide. A big hand brought her head irresistibly forward.

"Lick my balls, Cat. I want you to play with them," he said.

Eager to respond to the dare in his voice, she snuggled up between his muscular thighs and set to exploring his scrotum with her mouth. Taking his left ball into her mouth, she twirled her tongue around it and sucked gently. He groaned and pressed her head harder against his crotch. She gave the other ball the same treatment then slathered both of them with big, wet licks. Her tongue found the sensitive spot underneath and probed until Marcus was squirming in the chair. His hand tightened in her hair, pulling her away.

"Christ, Cat, that was a close call. You'd have had me hitting the ceiling in another second." His eyes were glazed and he was breathing hard. She smiled in satisfaction—it was exactly the effect she was going for.

"Come here." He grunted and pulled her close for a long, hungry kiss. She cupped his face with both hands and gave back every ounce of passion he offered her.

"I want to fuck you again," he mumbled a moment later, with his face buried between her breasts. "I want it so bad I can't wait anymore."

She stepped away from him and turned around, bending over. She asked, "Is this what you want?"

"Oh God, yes. Your beautiful ass. Have I told you how perfect your ass is yet today?" His hands were kneading her, lifting and spreading the cheeks.

"I don't believe so. Although you did mention something about adorable dimples."

"Yeah, right there." His fingers pressed into the flesh just as his cock found entrance to her pussy. "Beautiful...succulent...fantastic," he thrust into her with each word of praise, "sexy...impossibly...perfect...ass."

Marcus groaned and increased the rhythm of his pounding. Jan reached out and put her hands against the wall, bracing herself so that he could push into her even harder. The slap of flesh against flesh, his grunts of pleasure and her answering shrieks, formed an intensely animal experience and the wild rut was driving her crazy. Her fingers wanted to scratch into the wall. Each thrust lifted her onto her toes and practically off the floor. Marcus howled and stabbed into her with full force. She screamed along with him and they climaxed together with noisy, unrestrained enthusiasm.

"Think anyone heard that?" she asked a few minutes later, pressing close to Marcus' warmth. They were curled up together on the small cot, still naked and with only the thin blanket covering them. It would have been cold except for Marcus' still-fiery heat.

"Don't worry. It's the middle of the night and no one is around," he replied. Then he chuckled. "But I think we'll need to get the bedroom soundproofed."

"Before we have children," she said somewhat hesitantly.

"Definitely before then." He shifted to look into her eyes. "I guess a June ceremony would be rushing it."

“Hard to organize a society wedding in less than three months,” she agreed. It was just a part of this strange night to be suddenly discussing wedding plans with Marcus. Tomorrow she’d probably wake up and have to convince herself it was real all over again.

“September then?” he suggested.

“I think I can manage that,” Jan replied with a calm nod. Then she continued, “We’ll tell people that we met in New York, when I crashed the bio-tech conference out of curiosity. We bumped into each other again in San Francisco a few months later and started secretly dating. That’s close enough to the truth to hold up.”

Marcus lay back down and smiled. He looked utterly relaxed and happy. “I’ll leave it up to you to fill in the details, just step on my foot when I need to smile sheepishly at our guests.”

It was a lot, what he was expecting of her. To simply step into his very public life and be the woman who nabbed the most sought-after bachelor in America. They’d be the hottest, most talked about celebrity couple within moments of announcing their engagement. Jan put her head down on Marcus’ broad chest and grinned.

She knew she could pull it off. She’d become someone else for him, at least in public. Behaving like a rich society woman was easy, it just meant using all those lessons her mother had tried so hard to drill into her. Jan sent a silent thank-you to her much-maligned mother. She had been right after all. There was a purpose in knowing how to dress elegantly, set a table, choose a wine and probably even to knowing how to arrange flowers—although Jan still had her doubts about the value of those particular lessons. However, she also knew that it was her rebellions and the fierce, wild spirit that she shared with her mother that had won Marcus’ heart. Therefore, in private she’d always remain Cat. Dangerous, demanding, insatiable...and all his.

The End

About the Author

Simone Bern lives in western Canada, but she typically resides in fantasy worlds of her own creation. Writing is her obsession, a passion which she willingly denies only for her son, close friends and the opportunity to dance or visit new places. She loves to travel, having explored much of Europe, Asia and North Africa. One day she hopes to ride her motorcycle across at least one continent. Simone prefers romantic stories with strong characters who are sometimes wicked, sometimes wild...and always hot.

Simone welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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