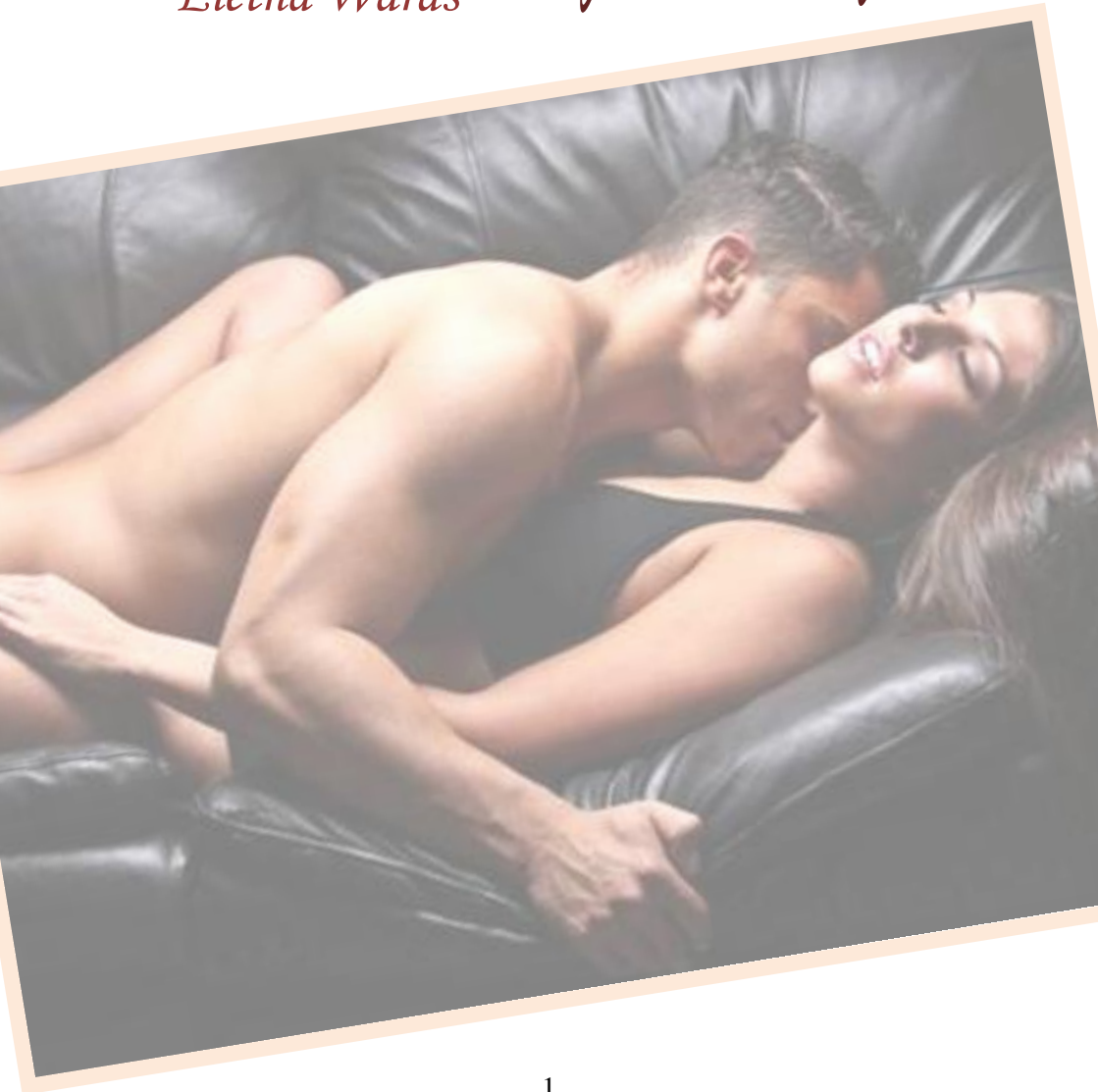


The Mercenary's Conquest

Lietha Wards



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Chapter One

It was the last day of school and the first day of summer holidays for the students of Scott Springs High School. With graduation ceremonies ending the week prior to the final exams, Mia had already taken everything from her locker with the exception of her exam supplies which she was taking home now. Lisa, her best friend was waiting for her outside on the steps with at least a dozen other people from her graduating class. They just finished writing their biology exams and Lisa was usually done earlier than her, but Mia's marks were always higher. Watching her, Mia thought Lisa was one of the prettiest girls she knew with long blonde hair and blue eyes.

Just then Lisa saw her and lifted her hand in greeting.

"Mia, how do you think you did?" Lisa broke away from the group and walked up to her with a stunning smile while tossing her long hair over her shoulder.

She shrugged, "I don't know." Of course she knew, but Lisa's grades weren't as good as hers and she didn't like to sound like she was bragging. However Lisa was smart enough to know that.

"You lie," she laughed, "You're a straight A student. I think you're just trying to make me feel better as usual because you're smarter than I am."

"If you actually studied Lisa, you'd beat me." She offered knowing that it was true.

"Maybe, but that means I'll have less time for boys." She wiggled her eyebrows causing Mia to giggle. Then she studied her friend for a moment, "Which reminds me, you need to come over to the police station and see the new deputy Mia. He's been here almost three months and you haven't even seen him," Said Lisa as her blue eyes glittered, "He's so dreamy. It seems as if he should be in Esquire, not handing out traffic

tickets. I mean if I wasn't dating Charlie, I'd be all over him like dew on grass."

Mia slanted an amused gaze on her friend, "Yes I know, you've mentioned him before." *About a hundred times*, she thought with amusement.

"Did I mention how big he was? I mean the way those uniforms fit, it's like he's got muscles everywhere."

"Yes, I believe you mentioned that too." She laughed.

"And he's got that look about him like he knows exactly what to do with a woman." She made a purring sound. "I wish the boys at the station would do one of those man calendars! Wouldn't that be a treat? He could be Mr. December and wear nothing but a Santa hat. What a thing to find under your tree."

"Now you're just getting crude." She said wincing at the bluntness her friend was known for. However she still couldn't take the smile off her face.

Lisa's dad was the local police chief in Scott springs, and she was very popular. Of course it didn't help that she was really pretty and was the head cheerleader on the squad. Mia and her had been friends since Kindergarten and although Mia wasn't popular like Lisa, they were still good friends. Lisa was dating Charlie Hingley, the Captain of the football team. His older brother Liam was a policeman and had been after Mia for her to go out with him. Mia liked Liam but didn't feel about him in that way. Like Lisa, Mia had known the Hingleys since kindergarten and thought of Charlie and Liam as more of friends. When he started asking her out, she thought he was teasing, but then the flowers came to the diner one day and she finally had to tell him how she felt. Her father thought Liam would be good for her, but she didn't agree. Even Lisa tried to push her into dating Liam because they could double date the brothers, but still Mia needed something more. She wanted that 'spark' that she'd heard can happen when you finally meet someone that's meant

to be. Her mother used to tell her about it when she and her father first met. Maybe she was living in a fantasy world, but if she was being honest with herself, Liam really wasn't her type. Not that she knew what her type was, but she was sure she would know when she met him. "Speaking of Policemen, didn't Charlie get accepted to the academy?" Mia said trying to get her to change the subject. If her social life was left up to Lisa, Mia would be in bending or breaking a lot of the morals she was raised with. Lisa may be her best friend but she did things that Mia didn't agree with. However, she never judged her. Mia supposed that maybe if she had Lisa's privileges she'd behave the same way—maybe not, but she still wasn't going to judge her.

"Yes." Lisa said with a pout, "he's leaving in the fall, so I'll probably be spending most of the summer with him," she gave her friend an apologetic look. "Although, I'll still try and make time for you. Now back to the subject you keep avoiding. He's still single from what Charlie says. He's a little older than our group, but who cares. A mature man means he knows what to do with a woman." Lisa wiggled her eyebrows again causing Mia to laugh.

Back to that again, she thought. "I don't have time for a man in my life Lisa. Since mom died, dad needs me more than ever to help with the diner."

Lisa felt terrible for reminding Mia of her recent loss, but she also knew that her friend always put everyone before herself and needed to be a teenager at some time in her life. Mia kept her grounded at times because Lisa knew she was spoiled and it was Mia who kept reminding her that not everyone had it as easy as she did. The words were never said, but Mia's hard work said plenty. Whatever Lisa asked for her father gave her and Mia had to work for everything she wanted. Sometimes she may have seemed pushy where Mia was concerned but she only

wanted her to have fun and maybe if she hooked her up with the new stud at the station, she would. She sighed heavily, "Can't you at least just take Saturday off. Charlie said Liam and half the squad are going swimming out at Craigan's Gully. Even though we're not invited, I could get Charlie to make an excuse and take us out there so you could meet him. I mean, who could possibly pass up men in uniforms *out* of uniform?"

Just then the school bus pulled up. Shaking her head, Mia stepped up to it, "I really can't, I've got to help my dad in the diner all summer. Joan and Al are there, but they're taking tomorrow off to go to her nephew's wedding, so I told dad I would cover it. So I'll probably be too tired to do Saturday." Joan was the other waitress her father employed. She was an older lady, who was very kind and never had any kids of her own, but she was a good friend to both of them when her mom died. Allan, her husband cooked for them and they lived above the diner. Mia and her father lived several kilometres out of town in a house they inherited from her father's grandparents. It used to be an old chicken farm many years ago, but they didn't have any animals now, because they didn't have the time to look after them.

Lisa gave her a look of surprise. "Aren't you going to College? You got accepted at three out of five of the top colleges in the state."

"I can't. Now that Mom's gone, Dad needs me. Maybe next year." She said trying to hide the enormous disappointment she felt at that statement.

Lisa looked incredulous, "Can't he hire anyone to help? Mia—"

"No, Mom's medical bills were too much for us to handle." She laid a hand on her friends forearm, "It's okay Lisa. I wouldn't trade the time I had with her in the world. Maybe next year things will be better."

Mercenary's Conquest

Lisa gave her a sympathetic look, "I didn't know things were so hard for you. I wish you told me about this sooner."

"It's really not that bad. Don't worry." She reassured her, "And besides, it's not like I would let you raid your piggy bank."

"Get in Mia." Said Betty the bus driver, "I've got other stops to make."

Mia smiled at the gruff woman who'd been driving her route since she started grade one. She may seem annoyed but Mia knew deep down the woman had a heart of gold. Once when she was little, she picked her flowers from a nearby meadow while waiting for the bus and gave them to her. The woman nearly burst into tears. Ever since then when she spoke, she may have sounded gruff but it was always followed by a glimmer of warmth in her dark eyes. "I'm coming. See you Lisa!" She hopped up the steps while Betty closed the doors smothering Lisa's view of her best friend.

"Sit down honey." Said Betty in a softer tone. Her expression was still harsh but her eyes completely contradicted it. Like everyone else who knew Mia, she loved her too. It was when as a little girl she picked flowers from a field for her. The stems were bent and the flowers a little ratty from the fidgety hands of an eager little girl, but it was the gesture itself that nearly made Betty burst into tears. She had just lost her husband several weeks to a heart attack, and had no family to help her through it but when that little girl gave her flowers she felt that things were going to be okay.

Through the years of driving and watching her grow, Betty realized that the young woman still possessed those qualities. Every time she saw her, she asked her how she was and somehow she never forgot her birthday. How she found out when it was she'd never know, but Betty considered Mia to be the closest person to her. No one else ever gave her that consideration and because of that Betty had a soft spot for her.

There wasn't one mean bone in that young woman's body.

Mia gave her a genuine smile before she took a seat at the back of the bus reflecting on what Lisa had said. She was a good friend, but there was nothing she could have done to ease their hardship. The truth was, she missed her mother terribly and so did her father. However, they tightened up as a family through the tragedy, but she would give anything to have her mother back. So what if she couldn't go to college this year? Maybe things would improve for the next year and she could go then. As for her best friend and her boy crazy ways, she found it refreshing. Lisa was honest and she loved that about her. She could have any man she wanted with her looks and bubbly personality. She was sure that if she wanted this new deputy, she wouldn't have a problem getting him, only she would have to get rid of Charlie, and Mia doubted very much that she would. She was sure that Lisa loved Charlie even though she never admitted it. Not only that, Charlie was very handsome and charming even if he was in that football jock stage. He did seem to genuinely care about Lisa.

Mia on the other hand, just couldn't seem to find that attractive. Maybe it was because her father and mother always treated her as an equal not a child and because of that she always felt that the boys in high school weren't that appealing to her. Although Liam was older than her and more mature, but she always felt as if he were a male friend, and could never see him in the boyfriend role. Regardless, it wasn't as if she had any spare time on her hands for a relationship anyway.

The next day she discovered that Lisa wasn't lying about the new deputy sheriff. Lisa's dad had phoned over an order from the diner for the guys and her father asked her to deliver it. Normally Joan would do the deliveries because she loved to visit with everyone, but since this was her day off it was Mia's job.

Mercenary's Conquest

"Hi honey," Said Eleanor, the clerk as Lisa came in the front door, "Ted said he ordered lunch for the men. Did Joan go to her nephew's wedding?" She slung the phone over her shoulder. Obviously she was in the middle of a call when Mia came in and just interrupted it to talk to her.

She grinned looking at the receiver on her shoulder, "Hi Ellie. Yes, she did. Aren't you on the phone?"

Ellie shook her head, "It's just old Mrs Herman thinking the neighbour is spying on her and her poodle again."

That made Mia laugh because Mrs. Herman's neighbour was at least ten years older than her and she was in her mid seventies, "Maybe you should set them up on a date. They're both widows."

"I'm tempted, maybe then she would quit calling me to talk about her haemorrhoids." She said as she rolled her eyes. Then she lifted the receiver and listened for a second before setting it back on her shoulder, "Now it's psoriasis."

Mia burst into another fit of giggles and shook her head at her, "Where did you want this?" She lifted the box of sandwiches in her hands.

'If you don't mind hun, I'll just let you through and you can take it in the back, I'm a little busy." She grinned as she pointed to the receiver before reaching under the counter and pressed a button causing a distinct buzz to sound.

"Thanks." Mia reached for the door while trying to balance the box of sandwiches. A chorus of greetings went off from the men and woman in the room when she walked in and she gave them a brief curtsy with a grin causing them to laugh, "A woman bearing food is always a welcome sight to a room full of hungry men."

"More than you know," said Liam practically jumping out of his chair to help her by taking the box from her hands, "By the way, when are you going to go out with me?" He flashed her a

flattering grin as he tossed a wrapped sandwich to Merrill, who caught it easily, “Corned beef, yuck, how do you eat that?”

“All about the taste buds Liam.” He said as he unwrapped it and took a healthy bite and groaned

“I already told you Liam—”

“That I was just a friend.” He looked down at her, “Yeah, but I’m thinking we should change that.” He gave her what he thought was his most charming grin, but it didn’t affect her at all. Liam never had a problem getting women, but for some reason Mia never fell for any of his tricks. It was unfortunate, because he really liked her, but she’d made it clear that she only saw him as a friend.

She gave him a warm smile, “Not today, and don’t hold your breath” she teased and waved, “See you all later.”

Numerous, ‘bye Mia—honey’ came from the group as she turned to leave just to bump into a wall. At least she thought it was, but walls didn’t grunt.

Slowly she guided her eyes up a thick chest contained within the familiar deputy uniform to the tan skin at his neck, stubble dusted jaw and onto one of the most handsome rugged faces she’d ever seen including striking green eyes with gold flecks contained within. “I—I’m so sorry.” She stuttered.

It was odd that neither one of them moved after that impact, but just stood there toe to toe. Suddenly she became more occupied with the warmth of his body and his distinct masculine odour. Yet, both of their eyes remained locked on one another. Then she felt it. Although she had to admit, a ‘spark’ didn’t quite cut it. It was more of a flash fire and when he spoke the warmth spread quickly through her whole body. *Oh my.*

“Mia.” He said in a low deep voice, almost intimately and Mia blushed completely because it wasn’t question. He knew exactly who she was.

The buzz of the door sounded at that moment, “Coming

through!" rang a masculine voice behind them.

Although she didn't look at him, Mia recognized it belonging to Justin Lang as he pushed man through the door holding on to his arm. As it was she and the new deputy were standing in front of the door and when Justin spoke, he circled his long arm around her back and curled his fingers at her ribcage to pull her out of the way. His hold was so surprising that she near gasped. Then to her surprise she felt it tighten for an instant but he still didn't release her. However he still didn't move away from her and now she could feel her chest make contact with the warmth of his body sending shivers through her. She was so spellbound by the large man's proximity that she barely heard the conversation behind her.

"What do you have there Justin," said Liam.

Oddly enough, the newcomer was making enough noise to draw attention from them, so no one seemed to notice the embrace the large deputy had on Mia.

"Sit down punk!" he shoved the guy into a seat before answering Liam, "this guy thought he could try and hide the bag of coke he had, then when I discovered it he had the balls to swing at me."

"Not to bright."

"Screw you." Said the guy and guided his eyes to Mia, "Well, yum, yum. Speaking of screwing—"

"Shut up," said Justin flicking his apologetic eyes to Mia who was wide-eyed.

"Come on, I'll see you out." Said the man still holding on to her waist causing her to quiver from the sound of his voice. Again she felt his hand on her, but he'd taken her arm this time. "You don't need to see this."

"Hey big guy," called the thug, "When you're done with her bring her back in—I don't mind used goods!"

"Shut the hell up!" Justin cuffed him hard across the side

of the head this time and the man howled.

"Oh God." She said thoroughly embarrassed at his words as the Deputy led her outside.

"Don't listen." He said beside her.

"I'm trying." She said softly. It was already forgotten as his hand tightened around her arm in reassurance. Mostly she was trying to calm her thudding heart at his touch.

Once outside he turned her gently to face him, "Since I already know your name, my name is Gage Hart." He said with a sensuous smile while tipping his hat.

"Hi." She managed. The man made her absolutely breathless, like she'd just run a marathon.

"I'll be seeing you around Mia." He gave her a sinful grin before he turned and went back into the station.

Mia must've stood there for five minutes absolutely stunned. Never in her life could she imagine the type of feelings he instilled in her in only a few minutes of having him touch her. She started wondering if maybe it was because she was so vulnerable after her mother's death and she felt so lonely since. Her father tried to comfort her, but it just wasn't what she needed. However, was this man? Just that smile he gave her actually made her mouth water. My God, anything else he did would probably have her drooling. One thing was certain, that was a dangerous attraction which actually frightened her a little. Maybe it had something to do with not ever having a man touch her like that. He seemed to know that she wouldn't protest. She'd seen it in his eyes and oh, what amazing eyes he had. Also when he'd held her about the waist, and she recalled the strength in that gesture. His arm was solid and hard. It was obvious that he was confident in his ability to handle a woman and not have her protest because that certainly was the last thing she would do. For once she wouldn't disagree with Lisa's opinion of a man. Everything she said was right on the nose.

Sighing heavily she turned and went back to work thinking that he was a dangerous attraction and way out of her league.

Gage went back into the building but he turned and watched the woman with intelligent eyes through the glass of the doors. He made sure she couldn't see him, just like he'd been doing for the past few months when he watched her. He'd heard the boys in the station talk about her, but it certainly didn't do her justice and if weren't for his years of experience of keeping his expression unreadable, he probably would have let his jaw drop. He knew she was pretty because he'd been watching her, but up close she was stunning, almost in an exotic way. Her hair was black but under the sun he could see subtle streaks of red. She wore it in a braid but it went to her waist and he was sure it was as soft as it looked. She had a lovely oval face with high cheeks, a soft bow mouth, and large sapphire eyes surrounded by thick lashes. Her skin was nicely tanned, but not too much like she'd been spending time in a tanning booth but more of being outside under the sun.

Then there was the way she reacted to his touch. He felt her stiffen and heard her breath pause when he wrapped his arm around her waist to move her out of Justin's path. She was the type of woman he could have held all day. Then, when those soft breasts of hers pushed up against him, he felt the overwhelming urge to bend his head and kiss her. Somehow he didn't think she'd protest. Gage knew women, because he had his fair share and he knew how he looked to them, but he actually *reacted* to this one completely surprising himself.

"She's pretty, isn't she?"

Gage had forgotten about Eleanor. He turned to look at the older woman who had a glint of knowledge in her eyes. "She is." He said honestly.

"She's single honey."

Gage actually grinned, "I heard."

Eleanor chuckled, "I suppose you have." She said leaning forward on the counter suddenly dropping her smile, "However, a big man like you is in his prime and if you start going after that sweet young thing, you be careful about not hurting her. Mia's a doll and everyone loves her, I mean everyone. She just lost her mother too. So if you hurt her, you'll have half the town wanting to string you up."

Gage had heard all of that too, but it wasn't going to dissuade him. Not much could frighten him with his past and after that brief meeting he already knew he wanted her. "I hear you Ellie." He said as charming as he could followed by a rakish grin causing the older woman to blush. Something she never did.

After a long day and the Diner door was locked, Mia groaned and sat in a booth as her father flipped the closed sign on and turned out the lights. Then he turned to her.

"Come on baby girl, let's go home." He walked over and smiled down at her while offering his hand.

"Actually dad, I think I need to walk."

"You've done enough walking today."

"No this is different. I just need to walk and sort my thoughts out."

He dropped his hand and stared down at her, "Are you okay honey?"

"Yeah dad I'm fine really." She smiled slightly.

"I'm sorry about college baby. I know how much that meant to you." He said thinking she was down because of it.

"Oh dad." She said standing up and hugging him, "It's not about that." She tucked her head under his chin, "I just really miss mom."

"Do you want to talk?"

"No, not really." She lifted her head back to look at him,

"Just know it's not you okay."

He kissed her forehead, "You know, you were always one to keep your feelings bottled up as not to bother anyone. Honey, that's admirable to a point, but you need to be able to let it out every now and then."

"I know." She gave him a reassuring smile.

"So you still want to walk home?"

"I do."

"All right then. Don't take all night." He released her reluctantly. He'd give her an hour before he went looking for her.

"I won't." Even though they lived two kilometres out of town, she actually did like to walk like she said. However, it wasn't often she walked home after the diner closed at nine, but she did walk to work in the morning. Her father would usually open the diner and she would walk in before the noon rush. It was still light out and she knew it would last until she got home. If it was dark, she certainly wouldn't be doing this.

She put her sweater on and locked the door of the diner behind her as her dad waved while he drove away. He tried again to convince her to take a ride with him, but she still refused. It wasn't that long of a walk anyway.

As it was three people that she knew pulled over and asked her if she would like a ride which she refused and they went on the way. However, when the fourth car pulled over, she realized it was one of the police station's vehicles, the Bronco. It sidled up beside her and the window rolled down to reveal the handsome face of the police station's newest member.

"It's a little late to be walking by yourself Mia."

That deep voice started a quivering down her spine again. *Lord*, she thought, *is that normal?* "I don't mind it."

"Come on, I'll give you a ride."

"It's okay. I can walk, I'm already halfway there." She said unable to meet his gaze.

"Get in honey, I don't feel right about leaving you out here."

Oh my, that endearment made her trip, but she managed to stay upright. She stopped walking and turned to look at him, to try her best not to show how he affected her, "Gage, I know everyone in town. I've lived here since I was a baby. No one would hurt me." *Oh heaven help me*, there was that heart stopping grin again. He did it when she took the defensive tone of voice with him and her knees went weak as it slid across his handsome face. Obviously not much bothered him.

"It's not the townsfolk I'm worried about. This is bear country and we have two reported attacks alone this road last week." He explained almost chuckling at her misunderstanding.

"Oh!" she said embarrassed, "Sorry."

He nodded toward the empty passenger seat without taking his eyes off her, "Get in."

"Okay." She walked around the passenger side as he bent over the console and opened the door for her. Once inside, she put on her seatbelt and brought her head up noticing his gaze was on her. "thanks." Even from the light of the dashboard there was no mistaking how handsome he was.

"Anytime." He grinned and shifted the Bronco into gear.

His smile was downright devastating to a woman, but she was sure he already knew that. A man like him surly knew his talents. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, for her anyway, he spoke

"How old are you?"

She turned to look at him not being able to hide her surprise, "Eighteen, why?"

He shrugged a thick shoulder, "Curiosity." He cast her a sideways glance, "I want to make sure I wasn't robbing the

cradle too much."

"What?" her eyes widened. Did she just imagine that?

"You heard me honey."

"Yes I guess I did." She couldn't help but let herself smile that time as she watched him. She was right about him, he did know his talents, because he hadn't even asked her if she was interested in him, he just assumed. Normally she would find that kind of conceit aversive, but Gage had a way of flattering a woman with it. Maybe it was because he was older than the men she was used to. It didn't help that he was drop dead gorgeous either. Either way, she was attracted to him and the thrill that went through her when he asked that question just confirmed it.

"Better." He said, casting her another glance seeing her smile and dropping his eyes to her mouth.

This man is way to sinful she thought as he turned his attention back to the road. At that time she was thankful that he had the radio on because her heart was pounding so loud in her chest after that look that she was worried he might actually hear it.

"Is this your house here?" he said pulling into the driveway.

"Actually it is." She cast him a sly glance, "But obviously you knew."

"I did." He said with a clever smile as he put the vehicle in park, "Like you said, it's a small town." He added bringing his eyes back to hers.

"Thanks for the ride," she turned to get out, but then his hand covered hers which caused her to stop breathing for a moment as and turned back to him with a questioning look.

"Mia, a bunch of us are going to Craigan's Gully on Saturday. I'd like to take you."

Craigan's Gully wasn't really a Gully, it was more of a

small valley and a fresh spring fed lake pooled in it. Everyone usually went fishing, swimming or camping there on their days off because it was absolutely beautiful. She had already known that they were going from Lisa earlier, but she sure didn't expect the town's most eligible bachelor to ask her. She was completely set back, and completely flattered according to the sensation of butterflies in her belly. "I—I have to work." She averted her gaze unsure on why he wanted to take her.

"I'll talk to your dad. My sister will cover for you that day. She'll only work for tips, so it won't cost your father a thing, that way I can take you."

This time she let eyes guide back to his after that confession, "Pardon me?" her expression didn't hold back the surprise she felt.

He misinterpreted it, "Unless someone's asked you already."

"No, no one has. I'm just a little surprised you want to take me."

He raised his brows, "Why wouldn't I, you're beautiful." He said bluntly as if it was common knowledge.

Mia blushed, "Gage I—"

"And," he continued, "When you blush it only makes you prettier."

"Stop it." She breathed.

He chuckled keeping his eyes on hers, "So what do you say?"

"I have to talk to my father."

"That's fine, but I won't take no for an answer."

"You are pushy." She said feeling her humour return.

"Yes I am. Also, I know about your mother and how hard you work so I made sure all of the bases were covered so you couldn't refuse me. News travels fast around here."

"Very true." She agreed and tilted her head slightly not

surprised in the least that he knew everything about her because gossip was common in her small town, but she didn't know anything about him, "Doesn't your sister have something else to do on a Saturday."

He gave her a grin that was devastating to her senses, "No, she's sixteen, but I asked her very nicely and she couldn't say no to me."

Who the hell in their right mind would, she thought especially if he smiled at them like that! "When did you ask her, I mean, we just met this afternoon?"

"This morning."

This morning? He was going to ask her even before he'd run into her at the station today? No one knew that she was delivering the lunch so he would had to have found another way to run into her. Not only had that but he already made arrangements with his sister. She couldn't stop the wave of excitement that went through her at the situation. This drop dead gorgeous man had actually planned to ask her out, "But—"

"I was going to come by the diner and introduce myself, but you've saved me a trip by coming to the station." He interrupted and answered her unspoken question. "Then when I saw you walking home, I just couldn't resist."

"I don't know really know you Gage."

"You already know my name. I'm a cop, I'm staying old Evan Parson's place out on Tower Road" He offered, "I look after my sister, who, God help me, is driving me nuts with all her teenage wiles." This got a round of laughter from her, "I'm twenty-six, and single." He added that last bit with a husky tone.

"Isn't Evan Parson's place a ranch?" she said changing the subject.

"Yes." He said with a glint of amusement knowing that she did.

"You live at Mr. Parson's?" she said in bewilderment.

“that place is huge.” Evan Parson was in his early seventies and usually only showed up during the spring. Most times he was in Europe, but everyone knew that he kept the place fully staffed to manage the livestock.

“He is a friend of my family’s and when he heard I was moving here he offered me his house while he was away. He told me it just sits empty most times.”

“It does.” She said, “I heard you could get practically lost in the house.”

He chuckled, “it’s not that big, but yeah, pretty large. My sister and I are quite content, but give me a log cabin in the woods and I’ll be happy.”

“Really?”

“I like feeling normal.” He explained, “And I’ve never spent a cent I didn’t earn through sweat and blood.”

“—and tears.” She added.

“Pardon?” He said arching his brows.

“That’s the saying. How it goes—” she explained, “sweat, blood and tears.”

“There were no tears, trust me.” He chuckled.

“Oh, you meant literally!” she corrected.

“I did.” He said with smiling.

“I’m such an idiot.” She blushed.

“No honey, you’re just very truthful.” His eyes lowered to her mouth again, “I find it very appealing, among other things.” He added deeply guiding his eyes back to hers.

Oh my, she thought.

“Now about Saturday,” he said getting back on the subject while sitting straight in his seat finally releasing her hand. “We’ll be with other people you know, so there’s no pressure here.” He reached up and tipped his hat, “I’ll pick you up around noon. Bring your swimsuit.”

“My, you *are* pushy.” She teased. “I never said yes.”

Mercenary's Conquest

"You have no idea how pushy I can be when I see something I like," he said huskily causing her to blush again. "And try and say no to me." He raised a single dark brow daring her to do just that.

She studied his expression knowing damn well no one probably ever did. He was very self assured and it just added to his mouth watering charisma. Then he gave her a lopsided smile and her heart started galloping again. Problem was, he knew exactly how he affected her and the addition of the smile told her as much, "I see your point." She breathed not even trying to deny it.

He laughed, "Good. Now get in the house, your father's been pacing on the porch for the last five minutes." He said nodding toward the house.

She twisted her head toward the house, "Oh how embarrassing." She said noticing him standing with his hands on the rail and looking at the vehicle with a dark expression.

"Not so much," came deep his voice, "Daddy's just worried about his little girl." He resisted the urge to reach up and brush a stray lock of that ebony hair off her face just so he could touch her. The woman was that enticing. *Behave yourself Gage*, he said to himself, *there'll be time for that*.

"Shush," she said blushing again, "I'm not a little girl anymore, and you behave. Don't give him reason to come off the porch. He has guns." She said with laughter in her tone causing him to laugh himself.

She got that right about not being a little girl. She was all woman, and a gorgeous one at that. "I'll see you Saturday honey." He said with a chuckle.

She gave him a dazzling smile, "Good luck with that." She nodded her head toward her father, "He's pacing the porch, when a cop brings me home. How do you think he'll react to a date?"

"I can be very convincing." He added with a deep drawl and a sensual smile.

No doubt, she thought as her eyes were drawn to his perfectly chiselled lips. He could probably talk the Pope into changing religion with the charm he possessed.

"Sleep tight." He said as she closed the door.

Mia watched him pull out of the driveway and drive off. It wasn't like she was even considering saying no to him at all and obviously he knew that. The man gave off the sense that no one refused him anything very often and in fact, she didn't want to. Lisa was right, he was handsome but why did he seemed interested in her? There were prettier girls in town and from what Lisa told him, chased the man like a pack of wolves, but he'd asked—no told her he was taking her out. She couldn't suppress the thrill that went through her and grinned for what seemed to be the first time in months.

She turned and went up on the porch.

"Is that the new deputy chief?" her father said as he watched the taillights of the vehicle recede down the road.

"It is."

"What's he doing driving you home? I thought you wanted to walk."

She stopped and gave her father a smile hearing the suspicion in his voice, "Apparently this is bear season."

"Oh. I forgot." He said with surprise, then his expression changed to genuine concern, "I should have insisted that you come home with me."

"I'm fine dad," she smiled and shrugged, "Then Gage came along and reminded me, so he gave me a ride."

Gage, is it? "What did you talk about?"

She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek, "Goodnight dad."

"Mia?" His brows shot up.

"Good night." She repeated, "And quit worrying." Mia went into the house and up to her room where she undressed for bed.

The next day Lisa picked her up in the morning in her little red convertible. They had plans to go shopping in the city four hours away and make a day of it. Lisa's nineteenth birthday was in a few weeks and her father gave her some cash to go shopping for a few new outfits before the celebration.

"Is your dad okay with you going?" She shot her a comical look as she put the car in gear and squealed off down the road. "He's so protective."

"Yes, but he was reluctant—about your driving." She laughed grabbing the dash.

"Whoops, sorry." She gave her a sheepish smile and levelled out at the speed limit. "So, are you going to bring a date to my party?"

"Lisa." Mia sighed.

"Come on Mia, Liam is really nice looking, and if he has a body like Charlie's, you're in for a treat. Not only that Charlie has this incredible amount of stamina that—"

"Oh Gosh! Lisa!" Mia slapped her hands over her ears.

Lisa threw back her head and laughed, "God, you are so naïve!"

"I told you, I don't feel about Liam that way."

"Okay fine, then what about the new guy. Liam says you were at the precinct yesterday, so you must've seen him." She said knowing perfectly well she did. Liam said that he'd walked her out and didn't come back at least ten minutes later. So they must've talked about something.

"I did."

"Oh! So what did you think?" she said with a sly prying look, "Was I wrong?"

Mia shrugged.

"Mia, come on!"

"Nothing," she finally said, "He just introduced himself."

"But he's hot, right?"

Mia didn't want to tell her about Craigan's gully, because she wasn't sure exactly what Gage wanted from her and she certainly didn't want to be barraged with questions when she didn't know anything herself.

"Mia you are killing me." Lisa said when her friend didn't answer.

"Yes—he's very handsome."

"He's a stud! Handsome? Give me a break." She rolled her eyes, "He's got that air about him that vibrates sex appeal. I bet he's really hung—have you seen the size of his feet? Why I bet he really does know how to please a woman—"

"Lisa—please!"

Lisa laughed, "Mia, you really need to get laid. You are completely missing out—"

Lisa continued talking but Mia somehow blocked her out and concentrated on the passing scenery. However, bits and pieces still reached her ears and when she started to talk about how his 'package' looked in his uniform pants, she just groaned. She loved Lisa like a sister, but she could be very crude. As far as Mia was concerned, intimacy like that shouldn't be talked about in such a way. It was a private matter, and when she finally decided to give herself to someone, she wanted to be in love with them and hopefully the moment would be very special.

Lisa had lost her virginity in eleventh grade under the bleachers of a baseball field while there was a game and Mia was in complete shock when she told her because the boy she'd lost it to wasn't her boyfriend. He was one of the players from another school that she'd flirted with several hours before. Charlie wasn't Lisa's first, but she really seemed to like him and

more often than not she heard about the things they did behind closed doors. Lisa talked about oral sex, positions, and to Mia's complete mortification, the size of Charlie's privates.

Of course Mia was curious about things like that, but not enough to hear the juicy details especially when Lisa had a way of describing things that could give a clear and concise picture of the overall event. It was hard to even look at Charlie without blushing sometimes. If he knew Lisa talked about him in such a way, it didn't show, but she doubted very much he would care. After all, he was a jock and could be quite crude himself.

Regardless of Lisa's initial conversation, the trip to the city for her clothes shopping was fun. Mia was so tired when she got home that she just went straight to bed and slept like a rock. Thankfully Lisa left the subject of Gage alone after she got it in her head that she didn't want to hear about it and they spent a good day together.

Chapter two

That next night after the diner closed her father called her from the kitchen. She found him pouring them both a tea when she walked out of the kitchen.

"I want to talk to you Mia."

"Sure." She said with a smile.

"Come and take a seat." He motioned to one of the booths against the wall.

Sliding into the cushioned seat she finally noticed the concern on her father's face as he sat across from her. "What's wrong?"

"Well I don't know if there's anything wrong." He gave her the other mug, "When I sent you over to Lauren's hair salon with her lunch order I had a visit from the new deputy chief of police."

“What? He came here?” Even though he said he was going to it still took her by surprise.

Nodding, he studied her expression, “That man seems quite sweet on you.”

“I really don’t know him all that well Dad, I just met him several days ago.” She explained trying to keep the excitement out of her voice. He actually came and spoke to her father like he said he would? It was just so difficult to believe.

“Yeah he told me. I just wanted you to know how I felt about all of this so I need you to listen to me because honey, you’re very precious to me and my only child, so if someone asks to start seeing you, I’m going to be a little protective.”

“I understand that.” She said trying not to show that she was bursting with anticipation at what Gage had said to him.

“Did you want to go to Craigan’s Gully on Saturday?”

She gave him a shy lift of her shoulders.

“Does this man Gage appeal to you? I mean Liam has been chasing you for over a year and everyone knows he’s more that trustworthy.”

“It’s not that. I’m not attracted to Liam that way—”

“And you are with Gage Hart?” his brows rose. “You hardly know him.”

“He’s different.” She shrugged trying not to look as interested as she was. How could she tell her father how he made her feel in the few moments that she met him?

He leaned back in his seat, not missing the pinkening of her cheeks when he mentioned the attraction. “I see that you’re a little sweet on him too. Although I am wary about a stranger asking you out, the man came in here and asked me personally if he could date you. In this day and age, it’s practically unheard of, and I respect him for that, but Mia, we don’t know anything about him—”

“He’s a cop.” She said as if that made all the sense in the

world, "And Teddy would clobber him if he hurt me."

"True on both counts, but a father's instincts are to make sure that you are protected. Do you know the man is twenty-six? That's eight years difference. It means he's got some experience under his belt where women are concerned and I worry about his intentions. That alone should make me tell you that you can't date him. However—" he raised his hand when she started to protest, "I know that you are old enough to make these decisions and I pray to God that your mother and I raised you right to do so responsibly."

"We'll be with half the police force in Scott Springs." She offered in her defence.

His brows arched slightly over her defence of the man, "Yes he told me that after I voiced my concerns."

She near groaned, knowing her father just basically read him the riot act. "I'm eighteen dad, I won't do anything stupid. Basically we're just going swimming with some friends." She looked away, 'Besides, he'll probably tire of me. I'm not all that pretty so I really don't understand why he asked me out in the first place." He father's silence made her look back at him just to see a shocked look on his expression.

"Is that what you honestly think?" She nodded, "My God Mia, that's as far from the truth as you could possible get."

"But I wasn't popular in high school and—"

"—no, but there's a reason for that. You weren't popular in certain ways honey, and don't give me that look. It wasn't that long ago that I'd forgotten my school days and what makes a girl popular. This man, Gage, sees you like I see you and that makes me know that he has an experienced eye. Because if you were dolled up no one would dare look away from you."

"Dad!" she instantly flushed.

"There's more so bear with me. I phoned Teddy and found out that this man is more than what he seems."

“Oh no, you didn’t!” her mouth fell open.

“Let me continue. His resume was so impressive that Teddy dare not hire him. He recently retired from the army. Now Teddy has a few friends in the government and found out that this guy used to be Special Forces. Apparently he speaks something like five languages and has knowledge of weapons, war tactics and so on, so he’s no naïve small town redneck.”

“Oh.” Her jaw dropped, “What’s he doing here?”

“Teddy didn’t know, but I worry to think why he picked our town over any other.” *And my daughter over other women, more experienced women*, he thought to himself, “I mean, no one would hesitate to hire this guy no matter where he applied.” He took a long drink from his tea that had gotten lukewarm, “Honey, you know I served in Desert Storm and although I never told your mother or you about the things I saw, they were what nightmares were made of, but what this guy did and saw probably goes beyond that. This is what worries me the most. He probably has ghosts in him.”

“Lisa likes him.”

He frowned, “Lisa likes him because he’s a good looking man, new in town so he’s got a sense of mystery around him, and wears a uniform. If she wasn’t dating Charlie, she’d be chasing Liam, his older brother just for that reason.”

“Dad.” She protested.

“I’m sorry if I’m sounding protective, but I gave you my reasons. I know you are smart Mia, but this is something you are not used to. Like I said I’ll give him credit for asking me, but there’s no doubt that he’s an assertive man in his prime and I don’t want him pushing you into anything you don’t want to do.”

“I promise I’ll stay with the rest of the group if that makes you relax, but Dad, I really want to go.”

“God knows you deserve it, so I’m agreeing, just please heed my warning okay?”

She jumped out of her seat and hugged him, "I will, thanks."

"You never know if his sister wants to just work for tips, I might take him up on this offer more." He grinned trying to savour his daughter's enthusiasm; it seemed like forever since he'd seen her really smile. Ever since her mother died, she seemed to have withdrawn into herself. He knew why. He was dealing with the death of his wife too, and Mia being the sweetheart she was, didn't want to bother him with her own grief. He had tried several times to get her to talk to him, or even a professional that deals with these sorts of things, but she would refuse. It was times like this that he was glad she had friends hoping that she was at least confiding in them.

However, he didn't miss the way she lit up when he mentioned the new deputy chief. Mia never had a boyfriend, and George thought this man was way too worldly for his daughter. He'd met Gage's type before, but not here. It was in Iraq. He had that look about him that made George know he'd killed before. When someone does that, a part of them dies inside. George had killed people himself, but whatever he saw in Gage's eyes frightened him. He knew the man probably saw some horrible evils and usually that made men like him unstable and dangerous. He of all people should know because of something that had happened in his past. Something he never told Mia, but his wife knew bits and pieces and she took it with her to her grave.

This new deputy was a frightening man, but he also knew that if he didn't give him permission to date his daughter he would take what he wanted anyway. At least this way George could keep his eye on the two of them. If he said no, chances were that Gage would somehow get his hands on her and there would be nothing he could do. He could read enough off of him to know that. *Keep your enemies closer*, he said to himself. If

anything happened to Mia, Teddy and he would take care of the man. He may have been older, but he could still handle himself.

The next day a brand new topless black and chrome Jeep TJ with overlarge tires pulled up in front of the diner. Mia saw Gage and a younger very pretty brunette get out.

"I'm going Dad." She called towards the kitchen as she grabbed her bag and tried not to look too hurried as she met him at the door. Although she thought he looked good in a uniform, she realized now that he probably looked good in anything. His white t-shirt stretched over his thick chest and biceps, tucked into his narrow waist of the jeans he wore and it left not much to the imagination that this guy was one hundred percent solid muscle. She could even see the rippled washboard of his abs at one particular moment when he was opening the door. Quickly she averted her gaze hoping not to get caught. She had never stared—no ogled a man like that before in her life.

Gage opened the door for his sister, "this is Jane." He said to Mia.

"Hi Mia," she grinned widely as she held out her hand and Mia shook it.

Mia smiled back. She couldn't help herself, the younger girl was infectious. "Have you worked in a diner before?"

"Of course." She extended a leg and pointed downward. "Notice the flat shoes. I'm not inclined to work all day in heels."

"Smart." She answered.

"Go have a nice time." She winked at Mia causing her cheeks to pink up a bit.

Then before she could say or do anything she felt his strong hand thread into hers, "We will, Jane, don't give Mr. Cooper such a hard time." He said over her head.

"Me?" she said with a look of mock shock, "never."

"Right." He flicked an amused look at Mia, "Ready?"

She couldn't answer but did manage a nod. His hand was warm and there was no denying the strength in it when it practically engulfed hers. He gave her a slow sensual smile almost as if he could read her mind.

"Let's go then." He tugged her out of the diner and walked her around the passenger side of the jeep.

"This is nice." She stopped to look at the Jeep.

"I'm glad you like it."

"It suits you." She said before she could stop herself.

"How's that?" He cocked a single brow.

She shrugged not wanting to say more. *Because it's big, powerful and sexy*, she thought to herself. "Never mind." She mumbled.

He just chuckled as he helped her in then reached across her lap for the seatbelt. Mia lifted her hands out of the way.

"what is this?"

"It's more of a harness." He glanced at her while brushing his knuckles across her midsection snapping the clasp in place. Then he gave it a bit of a tug and looked at her, "This vehicle is custom made for off road recreation so the harnesses are a necessity."

"Are you planning to take me off road?" she looked at him.

"Not unless you want me to." He answered with a tone that hinted to an underlying meaning before he turned and walked around to slide into the driver's seat and fastened his own harness. He started the Jeep and turned to her, "Any stops?"

"Nope." She smiled.

"All right." He grinned shifting it into gear and pulling out onto the road.

Mia placed her hand on the roll bar beside her as her ponytail whipped back off her face. She couldn't help herself

but laugh at the feeling and missed his sideways grin.

“You like speed?”

She glanced back at him, “I don’t know. I’ve never sped anywhere.” She answered honestly, “Lisa, my best friend, speeds a lot, but not when I’m with her because my father told her not to.”

“I bet you are an adrenaline junkie at heart, you just never got to explore it.”

“And I hear you’re the local expert.” She pushed her rebellious hair out of her face and turned to look at him.

“Ah,” he said as the knowledge hit him and he flicked her an amused glance, “Daddy’s worried.”

“Sorry, he usually isn’t so protective.” She said slightly embarrassed. After all, she was eighteen and her father still treated her as if she was in grade school over certain things.

“No?”

“No.”

He slanted her a sensual look, and his eyes dropped to her mouth, “Maybe he has good reason. Can’t say I blame him.”

“I told him he could trust you.” She practically blurted, that heated look completely unnerved her. Oh darn, there was that warm stirring in the pit of her stomach just because of it. It was a feeling that was new to her, and it was very distracting.

“You jumped the gun.” He said huskily as his eyes went back to hers.

“I hope not.” She smiled and narrowed her gaze teasingly, “If you misbehave, I’ll sick Teddy on you.” This got her a deep laugh.

“Don’t worry Mia,” he reached over and squeezed the hand she had on her lap, “Whatever I do to you, you’ll want.” Teddy was no threat to him and he knew it.

He followed that statement with such a sexy smile that told Mia, he was probably right and she didn’t know how to respond

to it.

Twenty minutes later he was parking the jeep on top of the gorge that overlooked part of the lake. It was a favourite hangout for a lot of people because the brave ones would dive off of the rocky cliff into the water fifteen feet below. There were already another half a dozen vehicles there and she easily recognized them. Liam's red Ford truck was there so she knew he was and she silently hoped that he wouldn't get upset at seeing her with Gage. Looking down at the complicated clasp she wasn't sure how to undo it and get out. However, just as she reached for it, he reached over and did it for her.

"Thanks."

"No problem." He said while hovering his head barely inches from hers.

She turned to find him looking at her and for a moment they just stared at one another. His eyes were so hypnotic, they seemed to see right into her bare soul. She couldn't find it in her to turn away despite the heat that seemed to form between them, "Down boy." She heard herself say in barely a whisper. A sinful smile draped across his handsome face.

"That goes both ways Mia." He said huskily.

"Yeah, you're so right." She flicked a glance at his mouth.

His answer was a deep sexy chuckle, "That's good to know." He took a deep breath and shook his head subtly as in disbelief before he turned away and easily hopped out of the jeep. "Come on Honey. I could stare at you all day, but people are waiting for this." He said as he walked around back and grabbed the cooler out of the back.

Did he really mean that about staring? Mia remembered the subtle head shake and wondered if she affected him as much as he did her. It was hard for her to believe because she honestly didn't think she was that pretty. Why did everything about this man set her senses on fire? She climbed out of the

jeep and grabbed her bag noticing that he waited for her with that same sensual smile on his face. Right then and there she knew she was in trouble of completely falling for him. She never knew it was possible that a man could flatter a woman with just a look, but Gage certainly could.

Together they walked down the path that carried them to the sandy beach below. There were faint voices floating up from there and she fell in step beside him as they made their way through the trees. She noticed that from the way his biceps were bulging that the cooler and its contents must've been heavy, but not once did it show on him. He walked at an easy pace and she unconsciously licked her lips that had become suddenly dry.

Here she was staring again. She had to distract herself. "Do you mind if I ask you why your sister lives with you?" she asked

"Not at all, no parents," he said without looking at her.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She detected a bit of a hard edge to his tone and felt like she was prying.

He spared her a glance that was unreadable, "No problem Mia, they weren't very good parents anyway." He returned his attention to the path

What a horrible thing, she thought. She couldn't imagine what kind of childhood he had. What could have been so bad for him to say something about his parents and not even show any emotion over it? She knew she had a sheltered life, because her parents loved her very much. It was hard for her to imagine someone who had a loveless upbringing. However, the man seemed so sure of himself and outgoing. Didn't most abused children withdraw? She snuck several looks at his profile while they walked down the path toward the beach. There was no doubt that the man was self confident from the set of his chin and the tilt of his head. It was as obvious as the sky was blue and

rightly so.

Shouts caught her attention when the others saw them emerge from the path and Mia breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that Liam brought a date. As if reading her thoughts Gage bent toward her and spoke low enough that no one else heard them.

"He didn't have a hope in hell anyway."

Mia actually giggled at his statement, "Shh."

"Tell me that's the beer!" said Liam.

"It is." Gage said as he set the cooler down, flipped it open and grabbed one. "Do you want one Mia?"

"I don't drink." She turned away a bit so he could only see her expression, "I'm too young."

"We're not on duty and none of us would say anything if you would like one, but there's no pressure here." He added holding the beer for her to take. "Liam's only twenty."

She shrugged and took it from him, 'Okay.'

He reached down and grabbed another.

In all there were about sixteen people there. Mia had changed into her bikini several hours ago and although she usually wore a tank top or a sarong she decided against it. None of the other girls there did and she didn't want to seem immature and insecure. However, Gage had no problem showing how gorgeous his body was. He had on swimming shorts but what was visible as sinewy and bulky; from his thick chest to his washboard abs, fat stomach and long muscular legs. There were several tattoos on his thick biceps and a Celtic cross on his left pectoral with some sort of saying written in it in a language she didn't recognize. She was too shy to ask him what it meant because he would know that she was staring at him. It didn't take long for her to notice that the other girls stole glances at him when they thought no one else was watching causing her to feel what she later determined to be a twinge of

jealousy. It was an emotion that she wasn't used to so it took some time to realize what it was. Yet, she had no reason to think that, because it was her he brought and it was her he watched through the crowd when he was engaged in conversation with another. She would just give him a shy smile and turn away.

Despite that little episode of Jealousy, Mia couldn't remember having such a good time before in her life. It didn't help that she was with the most gorgeous man there and he was very attentive to her. She didn't think she laughed so hard since before her mother died. Especially when the men thought they would challenge each other's masculinity and race across the lake and back while the woman cheered on the shore.

First of all Liam and a few others tried to convince Gage that he was too old to be swimming and he should leave it to the younger men. It was only later that she found out from some of the other girls that they took one look at the man's body and knew they were going to be creamed, and that was a complete understatement. The man was almost as comfortable in water as he was on land and left the rest of them behind. Then he emerged from the lake and still had enough energy to scoop up Mia in his arms and carry her back into the water screeching while the others laughed. "I'm not the only one getting wet." He said as he tossed her into the lake.

They spent part of the day swimming and Merrill fussed with the volleyball net he brought causing Debbie, his girlfriend to laugh.

"He can shoot a twig off an oak tree at fifty yards, but he can't put together a net." She said to Mia causing her to burst out laughing and Merrill to shoot them both a suspicious look.

"These instructions don't make any bloody sense!" he scowled at the piece of paper he held.

"You're probably reading French," offered Gage getting a

laugh from those around them and Merrill to shoot him a look of contempt.

"There isn't any English on here Gage. It looks like Spanish, German, " he squinted at the wording,"—and who the hell knows—" he threw up his hands in defeat, "—obviously speaking English isn't important."

Gage went over and held out his hand, "Let me help."

"Yeah, you try." Merrill gave him the paper and Gage started to point to the poles and tell him which one to insert where.

"Man you speak Spanish?"

"It's actually Greek." He chuckled.

"Wow, just when you think you know a guy." He bent over and started assembling the parts. "Who the hell puts freakin' Greek on instructions anyway?" He grumbled.

Debbie made her way over to Mia who was sitting on a log that Gage spread a blanket on nursing her second beer. She took a quick glance over her shoulder, before sitting next to her, "Fess up Mia, how the hell did you get him to go out with you. Everyone's dying of envy." She whispered so no one else could hear.

"He just asked me." She said with some surprise and a look of innocence that no one could contest.

"Did you know that he's been chased by every single," she cleared her throat and lowered her voice so the others didn't hear her, "and not so single woman since he got here, hell, he could have a harem. Yet, he didn't date anyone until now."

Maybe it was the beer that made her a little tipsy but she giggled at Debbie's choice of words and coughed catching some of the beer in her windpipe.

Debbie smiled, "Sorry, I should have waited."

"Its all right," she smiled, "I don't know why he asked me

out anyway.”

Debbie leaned back and roved her eyes over Mia, “No? Mia, you have a lot to learn. You are drop dead sexy in that bikini. Obviously Gage can see the swan in a pond full of ducks. If I had your body I’d be chasing a modelling career.”

Mia flushed furiously focusing her eyes on the other woman in disbelief. First Gage, and now Debbie.

“I’m serious.” She saw her expression, “You really don’t have any idea how beautiful you are do you?”

“I don’t think I’m ugly.” She said sheepishly.

“Oh dear, he does have good instincts.” She laughed and patted Mia’s knee, “Here he comes, I’m outta here.” She stood up and flashed her a smile as Gage approached her.

To Mia’s ultimate surprise he straddled the log beside her and placed a large hand on her crossed thighs and one on her hip to pull her between his legs, “Are you having fun?” he leaned down and spoke softly in her ear.

She felt her breath catch in her throat at the close proximity. It wasn’t normal for her to let a man get so close to her but she couldn’t deny that she liked it with him—a lot. “I am.” She said not realizing how breathless she sounded.

“Me too.” He squeezed her thigh and it was then that she realized he still had his hand on her. He felt her stiffen, “Sorry,” he said removing his hand, but he didn’t move away from her, “I forgot that you’re not used to this.”

Feeling brave she looked up at him and gave him a generous grin, “You don’t know what I’m used to.” What she got in response was a roguish smile and a prolonged stare from those striking hazel eyes.

“Oh I can guess little girl, but don’t tempt me. I’m in no hurry to ravish you quite yet.” His eyes darkened revealing more flecks of gold. “Although you are very very tempting.”

If she was feeling brave, his own self confidence just

crushed hers, "Oh dear, you have to stop." She said in the same breathless tone meeting his eyes and causing him to chuckle deeply.

"No, don't back down now." He said huskily, "You were doing so well." He gave her a devilish grin.

Her eyes dropped to his mouth, "Well—then you'd better enlighten me to what I was suppose to say, because I'm struggling for words right now."

His free hand came up and caressed the soft line of her jaw as his face inched closer to hers, "You were supposed to say 'what do you see that is so tempting?' and then I go on to describe how incredibly beautiful you are." He said deeply as he tilted her face up and settled his mouth to the right of her lips to brush a kiss in that same area, "Then you become so flattered that you can't resist my charm."

Her eyes closed against the caress of his mouth and she was sure her heart was ready to pop out of her chest from the way it was beating, "I'm already having that problem." She admitted softly getting her a deep throaty chuckle as he turned her face the other way and repeated the sensual contact of his warm mouth to her skin.

"Then—" he erected himself and focused his green-gold eyes on her again, "we carry our relationship to the next level and you allow me to kiss you for real."

A slow smile spread across her face, "Is that what the next level is?"

"In my book and with you, it is." His thumb rubbed her chin softly.

Her brows went up, "So if it wasn't me, but someone else, what do you consider your next level?" Just when she thought he couldn't look any more appealing, his smile went from devilish to downright sinful and his eyes twinkled mischievously.

“Mia, I’m beginning to think you *are* a bit of an adrenaline junkie. Didn’t daddy ever tell you *not* to tease the carnivores at the zoo?”

Her eyes widened at that statement.

“Yes, I can see he has.” He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. “But don’t worry, this is one carnivore that can control his hunger, for now.” He stood, and held out his hand, “Time for volleyball.” He had to quit touching her, because he could feel the familiar heat enter his groin and walking around with an erection in his swim trunks would probably draw some attention.

Smiling she took his hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet, but like before he didn’t release her until they reached the others.

Volleyball was a blast and Mia missed the ball more than she hit it, but everyone didn’t seem to mind. Then as it got dark Merrill whipped out his guitar and sang while they sat around the fire.

It was around midnight when they all started packing up. Merrill was just pulling away in his old Ford Bronco leaving Gage and her the last to leave. As before he walked her around to the passenger side, but he didn’t help her in. Instead he turned her around to face him and gently pushed her against the side of his jeep, bringing his body up against hers.

“Gage—” she said in surprise at the quick movement.

“I’m not going to hurt you Mia.” He said huskily looking down at her, “I’m just asking you for a goodnight kiss now, because your father is probably staking out your front porch with a shotgun slung over his shoulder and I know he won’t let me and I *really* want that kiss.”

This caused her to laugh despite the intimate position, because he was probably right.

“That’s better.” His hands cupped her head and he began

to lower his head to hers.

"Gage—" he stopped barely inches from her mouth, "I never kissed a man before."

"Good." He said against her mouth as he kissed her not the least bit bothered by her confession.

If she could have fantasized about this, it still wouldn't sum up the feelings racing through her right now as his mouth took hers. Her heart rate tripled, and she suddenly felt very warm. Then her knees started to tremble. Involuntarily she moaned against him and that caused him to finally lift his head.

"Better than I thought." He murmured deeply against her mouth.

"Me too." She rushed out causing him to smile and his eyes to glitter.

"Honey, you are way too honest with your feelings." His spoke deeply as eyes searched hers. "I'm becoming quite attracted to that characteristic you have—among other things." One of his hands slid down her ribcage to her hip. His other hand remained on her cheek, "I bet that wild side of you is burning to get out."

"What makes you think that?"

"I know, not think and it's written all over that innocent little face of yours." His thumb brushed over the soft silky skin of her cheek, and he lowered his head to brush his mouth across the same area, "I was wondering what it would be like to touch you and I like it. I like it a lot."

He was such a large powerful man that even if she didn't like him so close to her, there was no way on earth she could push him back, but she didn't want to. She could feel the thud of his heart vibrate against her chest and the heat of his body was stirring feelings in her that were mind rattling. Unconsciously she let her jaw drop and her lips parted ever so slightly. So he did what any man did with such a pose. He

lowered his mouth to hers again and slanted his lips passionately over hers. This time her hands slid up his hard chest and around his neck and it gave him the invitation he needed to take it farther. Sliding his tongue between those full parted lips he applied more pressure causing her to open her mouth even more taking complete advantage of her naïveté. Then he slid his hand down to her upper thigh and gently lifted it up his hip while pushing himself closer to her. When she moaned, he thought he'd discovered the equivalent of gold with her unexplored passion. Not once did she hesitate or tell him to stop. However his conscience, what little of it he had, did. Slowly he lifted his head and released her thigh.

"Wow." She mouthed with her eyes still closed.

"yeah, that explains it." he searched her expression. Desire registered all over her face, "You are one very desirable woman. However, I promised you I wasn't in a hurry so let's take this slow. First there are some rules—"

"—rules" her eyes fluttered open and her brows rose, "Oh please tell me you're not going to turn into some sociopath."

This caused him to laugh and ease away from her a bit. Being so close to her had him aroused enough as it was. "No, far from it. I would just like you all to myself. So rule number one—" he paused grinning, "You have to wipe that sensual look off your face, I'm having trouble concentrating." She laughed, "—where was I? Ah yes," he lifted his arm and placed it on the roll bar above and to the side of her head while leaning down and kissing her cheek, "No dating other men," he moved his head to the other side, "rule number two" he kissed the other cheek, "No looking at other men," he lifted his head, "Rule number three," he brushed his lips across her forehead and noticed that she closed her eyes against the caress this time, "No being alone with another man,"

"Those are easy rules," she breathed, "I've never had that problem."

"You will," he circled his hand around to the back of her neck lowering his mouth to hers again giving her another passionate kiss, "Now," he hovered his mouth above hers, "Repeat the rules—" he grinned sinfully.

"Oh I can remember." She said softly circling her arms back around his neck, "Rule number one," she lifted herself up on her tiptoes and kissed one cheek, "Rule number two," she kissed the other, "And I can't reach your forehead because you are too tall, so I'll take—"

He lowered his mouth to hers again circling his arm around her to pull her tight against him, "Mia you are so damn fine." He murmured against her mouth, "But I've got to get you home before Ted rips me a new one on Monday because I brought you home late and your father tells him."

"Understood." She smiled.

"Get in."

He wasn't wrong about her father waiting on the porch because as the Jeep pulled up outside of the house there he was. At least he didn't have the shotgun. "Oh oh."

"I think I'm on the hit list already." He ducked his head a bit to look under the roll bar to spot her father on the deck pacing like a German war camp guard.

"He's just protective."

"That makes two of us." He reached over and squeezed her hand, "I won't kiss you in front of him, so you'd better get going, because I'm really tempted and if I do, he may shoot me at the way I was kissing you earlier."

"You are probably right." She smiled, and started to get out when his hand stopped her and when she faced him again there was no mistaking the smouldering look in his eyes.

"I'll see you tomorrow Mia." He said deeply.

“Okay.” She couldn’t contain the thrill that went through her at that deep promise and her smile turned into a ravishing grin.

“Goodnight Mia.”

“Goodnight.” She hopped out of the Jeep and retrieved her bag. Then giving him a final glance she walked toward the porch where her father stood with his arms crossed.

He looked at his watch, “It’s after one in the morning Mia.”

“I know Dad, we were having fun.”

The look on his Daughter’s face made the worry and frustration flood out of him. By the looks of it he had nothing to worry about. His eyes guided to the man in the Jeep who lifted a hand to wave before he pulled away.

“I was worried.” He admitted.

“No need. He was a gentleman dad.” Of course she wasn’t going to tell him that he kissed her, not to mention the intimate position they were in while he did it, because her father would definitely go off the deep end by the way he was acting.

“I’m glad to hear that.” He said with an expression that read opposite.

“Don’t you have to open the diner tomorrow?” she cast him a humorous look.

“Point taken. I might be a little too over protective.”

“Just a smidge.” She kissed him on the cheek and walked into the house with him right behind her, “So what did you guys do? And I hope that isn’t alcohol on your breath.”

“It’s beer, two bottles in nine hours under the supervision of half of Scott Springs’ police force.” She started going up the stairs to her room, then turned with an exaggerated sigh and put her hands on the banister, “I am responsible dad.”

He gave her a bit of a sheepish smile and held his hands

out helplessly.

"I'm eighteen Dad, I'll be fine." She smiled at him, "Please don't worry. If there is anything out there that could hurt me, I'm sure after what you told me about Gage, he could handle it."

He nodded knowing darn well she was right. It's too bad she didn't know that he thought Gage was the biggest threat.

"Goodnight dad."

"'night honey." He watched her turn and go up the stairs. She wasn't just happy, she was radiant. That alone should make him let her enjoy this night, but something about that guy just didn't sit right with him.

The next day she went to work with her father and about noon Gage and Justin came in with their uniforms on as she was pouring coffee. Mia didn't think he could possibly get any more handsome, but after knowing what kind of body his uniform contained she couldn't help but feel excited at seeing him. It didn't help that she remembered his mouth and hands on her either so to see him in the light of day afterwards made her feel slightly vulnerable towards him.

"Hi Mia," said Justin taking a seat by the window, but Gage removed his hat and leaned down to kiss her on the cheek.

It was a small sign of affection but it was done purposely to let the other men in the diner know who she belonged to.

"Sleep well?"

"I'm tired." She smiled at him, "Now sit down if you're hungry before my father thinks I'm paying you special attention." His closeness was causing her knees to weaken and she would most definitely collapse if he kissed her or spoke her name in that husky manner that said more than 'Hi'. Obviously he didn't forget the kiss they shared either by the twinkle in his eyes when he erected himself.

"I'm very hungry." He said in a tone that meant not for food.

"Shh, I know my dad is watching the both of us." Gage looked past her for a moment into the window opening to the kitchen and nodded confirming her statement, "So tell me what you want to eat."

"Well since I want what's not on the menu, I'll settle for a burger and fries with the works. Bring one for Justin too since I forced him to come along and nice hot coffee—Okay sweetheart?"

"I'll get right on it." she turned while pulling out her pad and writing the order while admitting to herself that she liked the endearments he used on her.

Gage took his seat across from Justin who was tapping his fingers on the arborite. It was killing him to know how the hell Gage ended up with Mia, just as it was all of the other single men around the station.

"I gotta ask man. How the hell did you get permission to go out with Mia?"

He shrugged his large shoulders, "I asked her father."

"That simple?"

"Yeah." Gage answered studying his partner's expression. He knew the single men at the station, especially Liam, had been lusting after her for years, but now she was his as far as he was concerned. He'd been watching her and planning his approach carefully. So far it had gone as planned, but just because she went out with him, didn't mean that the other men didn't suddenly feel brave and want to ask her, so he would put a stop to it immediately and stake his claim.

"You know that half of us asked her out or wanted to, but either Chief Ted or George would threaten our lives?"

"I hear the talk." Gage admitted with a smile, "Why do you think I asked her father?"

"I'll be damned." Justin said in awe. *Why didn't anyone else think of that?*

"A little bit of respect goes a long way Justin."

"So what's the story? Is she as sweet in bed as we all think she is?" He glanced at her while she reached over the counter for something showing the curve of her bottom. When Gage didn't answer right away he brought his attention back to him and wasn't prepared for the menacing look in his eyes. "What?"

When he spoke his voice was calm, but not the type of calm that you would feel safe and relaxed around. It was a tone of voice that would scare the crap out of the most seasoned veteran "I'm new in town Justin, so I'm going to give you guys a grace period, but if I ever hear anyone talk about Mia like a piece of meat, I'll bust their teeth out. Just so you know, she's mine now and if any one of you gets some idea in their heads about her I'll break some bones."

"Wow. I'm sorry Gage. I didn't mean any insult, we all think she's as sweet as hell." It was true, they all did, but being a man made other thoughts crawl into his head about her. Especially the way she looked. Mia was exotically beautiful. She had long ebony hair and gorgeous large blue eyes that a man could drown in. Her skin was naturally blemish free and soft looking and every time she smiled, lovely little dimples appeared at the corners of her mouth. Then there was this small beauty mark on her left cheek that added to her uniqueness. Remarkably, her legs were toned from years of waitressing and young, smooth and long and what he wouldn't give to have those wrapped around him for a night. A body like that could certainly rock his world.

He was losing himself in his imagination about her again when Gage's voice cut through.

"She is, but now she's off limits. Understood?" his

expression darkened in warning.

“Perfectly.” He said holding his hands up in surrender just as Mia came back with their Coffees. Justin liked Gage a lot because he had that quiet strength about him that he always wanted to emanate himself, but Justin was more playful. Still he found it admirable. The man would walk in a room and seemed to have an unyielding presence of authority. It was the type of characteristic that one had to be born with, you couldn’t learn it. A couple of them made the comment that it was so much that even Teddy listened to what the man had to say and Teddy never listened to anyone.

“Sorry, brewer’s running slow.” She said giving them a brilliant smile.

“No problem.” Said Justin flicking a glance at Gage. Now he was wary about anything he said to Mia around the man after that possessive display. After all he was the size of a freight train and just as menacing. He’d also heard stories about the man in special ops or something like that and those threats he made him think he wouldn’t think twice about following through on them.

“What time are you done work?” Gage asked.

“Eight.” She switched her gaze to Gage, “And you?”

“Nine, but I was thinking that I would like to take you out.”

“I’d love it.” She said enthusiastically . Then as if she realized how eager she acted, she tipped her head shyly.

She didn’t know how innocently appealing that was. He gave her a grin as a bell rang.

“That’s your lunch. I’ll be right back.” She turned and went back toward the kitchen to retrieve it. As she reached for the plates her father grabbed the other side so she’d have to stop.

“What’s he want?”

She tilted her head, "To take me out tonight. Why?"

"Tell him you have to work."

"No—Dad we've been over this." She gave the plates and extra tug followed by a narrow look and he released them. "Behave yourself." She chastised him, "We've been over this."

"I want you home at a decent hour this time." He added shooting a mistrustful look at the large man in uniform who seemed interested in something Justin had to say. It wasn't anything outward that set him off, but Gage had the air about him that seemed to know everything was going on around him. Even now while talking to Justin, he was sure Gage knew exactly where everyone was in the diner, especially Mia. He noticed how Gage looked at her and it made him uneasy. Like letting a tomcat in a canary cage.

She turned away pretending like she didn't hear him taking the food back to Gage and Justin. She loved her father dearly, but he was acting a little too protective. It wasn't like him, and she really liked Gage. Her father shouldn't worry, because Gage could have certainly done more to her last night if he wanted to, but he didn't. She took a deep breath thinking that she almost wished he did.

"I'll come get you tonight around nine thirty honey." Gage said as she set their meals on the table.

"I can't wait." She mouthed to him before moving off.

"Damn." Said Justin then catching Gage's hard stare, "Sorry, I can't help it. Look at her." He gestured a hand in her direction.

"That's my whole point, now eat your burger before I'm tempted to stuff it somewhere." He growled out.

Justin couldn't help but grin hiding it behind the burger as he took a bite. Truthfully, if Mia had agreed to go out with him, he'd probably be just as possessive. It was no secret among the men that she was a beauty. However, after she turned Liam

down, who used to be the best looking of the bunch until Gage came along, none of them wanted to ask her for fear of rejection. Not only that, Liam was hauled into Ted's office and told to stay away from her. Apparently his advances were making Mia nervous and George told Ted who had been close friends for years.

As promised the jeep pulled up in front of her house at nine thirty.

"Mia where's he taking you?" He stopped looking at her attire, "And are you seriously going to wear that?"

"I don't know dad he never said." She turned to face her father, "Why are you being so difficult." The front doorbell rang. "Let him in Dad, I have to get my purse and please be nice to him. I really like him." She gave him a pleading look before she rushed up the stairs.

George shook his head and opened the door and let Gage in who extended his hand for a hand shake which George accepted. He had to admit, the man was loaded with manners. Still shaking his hand he just pointedly asked him, "Where are you two going."

"I thought I'd take her to Al's." Gage answered without hesitation. It didn't bother him in the least that Mia's father was asking.

"Oh," he said, "That's out on the interstate, isn't it?"

"Yeah, Merrill and Deb, and Justin and his date are going to meet us there." He could see her father visibly relax. "George," he said, "I'll give you my cell phone number if it makes you feel better. I promised you before I wouldn't hurt her."

"Yeah, I know."

"I understand your concern."

He looked the large man over, "I already told you that I'd shoot you myself if she just as much as sheds one tear over you. I wasn't kidding." He said repeating the words that he'd told

Gage when he first came to him for permission to ask Mia out.

Gage straightened himself to his full height, "I know you weren't." he answered seriously, "I meant what I said."

George studied the man's expression, he did seem deadly serious and, unfortunately, not the least bit intimidated by that statement. Finally he nodded as Mia came down the stairs.

"Hi."

"Wow." He said thickly as he held out his arm not missing the flicker of disapproval from George out of the corner of his eye, "You look gorgeous." She was wearing a black knee high dress with a flared skirt that complemented her ebony hair and blue eyes. It was low cut but in a conservative style.

"Thank you." She blushed.

"Ready?"

"As I'll ever be." She smiled and walked through the door ahead of him.

Once outside, Mia glanced back at the house to make sure the door was shut. "He read you the riot act again, didn't he?" she couldn't stop the worry reaching her expression.

He grinned at her and placed his hand on the small of her back, "In spades." Then he leaned down to speak in her ear, "But I'm still not discouraged, so don't look so forlorn. It'll take more than that to discourage me especially after looking at you in that dress."

"I'm glad." She said truthfully as he helped her into the Jeep keeping her head averted so he couldn't see her blush.

Al's was a roadhouse but apparently no one thought to i.d. her because she was with three cops. Once they all sat at the table Gage placed his hand across the back of her chair as Liam ordered a pitcher of ale, but Mia feeling guilty about drinking the beer the day before only ordered a coke. She was relieved that no one ribbed her over it. Gage was right, there was no pressure if she didn't want to drink and she felt

comfortable sitting with the group. It wasn't too long after that they the place was rocking and Mia finally had to tell Gage that she couldn't possibly dance anymore.

"Let's get out of here." He wrapped his arms around her waist and bent down to speak in her ear so she could hear him over the sound of the music. "I want you all to myself anyway."

She nodded despite her nervousness of not knowing what he had planned. However, if she wasn't wary before, she certainly was when he drove to a remote area overlooking Scott Springs to watch a meteor shower. He got out of the jeep and pulled a blanket out of the back.

"Come on Mia, this is the best way to watch it." he grinned as he spread the blanket on the ground .

Staring at the blanket she knew he intended to share with her, she was apprehensive if it really was a meteor shower but she told herself over and over again that she could trust him. "Okay." She got out of the jeep and tucked her dress under her legs as she sat down.

"No, like this." He lay down on his back and pulled her down with stacking his hands behind his head and letting her use the crook of his shoulder as a pillow. Then he chuckled as she felt a chill go through her body, "Don't be nervous honey, I'll behave."

She turned her head toward him, "That's not it." What was wrong with her? She actually felt disappointed that he'd said that.

"Are you cold?"

"No."

"then what is it?"

"Well—I'm not quite sure if I want you to behave."

That brought his gaze down to hers, "Really?"

She didn't answer.

"Mia, don't push things. I do want you. I have from the

first moment I saw you, but you're not ready. If I move to fast, I'll frighten you and that's the last thing I want to do."

"You don't know that Gage."

"Ah, I do." He reached up and chucked her chin, "You are too naïve to understand, but I'm a little more experienced." She went to protest but he stopped her," However—" he grinned, "That doesn't mean I'm not going to touch you and kiss you more just on your suggestion. Okay?"

She smiled, "all right." Then streaks of light in the dark sky caught her attention, "Oh—Wow! That's amazing." She said.

"I agree."

When she looked at him he wasn't looking at the sky, he was looking at her and she felt her cheeks heat up. "I need to ask you something.

"Anything." He said deeply.

"Why me?"

All expression washed from his face and he became serious, "Honey, just not knowing the answer to that question answers it." Her puzzled expression made a smile tug at the corner of his mouth.

That didn't exactly answer her question, "Debbie says that you have hoards of women chasing you."

A deep throaty chuckle was his answer and he laid back and watched the dark sky, "that's flattering. Maybe so Mia, but I'm not interested in anyone else."

"And—" she rotated toward him, "Why is that?"

"Who's pushy now?" He said without looking at her, "Watch the show sweetheart."

"Chicken." She grinned and rolled back

"Not so much, but rolling your ripe little body against me makes me forget what the hell we were talking about."

This time she laughed, "I'm beginning to really like you Gage—oh look at those!" She pointed at several streaks of light

in the dark sky.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself." He said as he watched the sky again, "This meteor shower is much better than I thought it would be."

"I could do this all night." She breathed watching another tumult of shooting stars not realizing that he was thinking of all other sorts of things he could be doing with her.

"I take it, you've never done this before."

"No, not like this."

"Like this?"

She tilted her head up to meet his gaze, "I mean, not lying on the ground with a man I barely know watching a meteor shower." She smiled, "Although my father is really good at picking out constellations and things like that, but I really don't have a clue."

"I see. Speaking of your father—"

"Oh—oh, is this where you tell me you don't want to see me anymore because my dad is too overprotective."

He didn't miss the concern in her voice, "No, definitely not. I've already told you that I'm not discouraged. So quit worrying. I've faced worse adversaries."

She laughed, "I suppose you have."

"Now—as I was saying—your father, does he have an issue with my age?"

"He did mention something, but it wasn't as much of a concern for him as your background." She said softly.

"My stint in the military?"

"Yes."

He adjusted his head to better look at her, "Such as?"

She shrugged slightly, "He said you have ghosts in you."

"Oh."

"do you?"

"Hmm, I can honestly say that I've seen some pretty

horrific things." He paused, "I've also done some terrible things too Mia. I won't lie to you."

"Have you killed people?"

"Yes." He said seriously, "And that's all you need to know about that. However, I will tell you that I will never lay a hand on you in anger. I would never hurt you Mia. I swear."

Slowly she sat up and stared down at him, "Gage, that never even crossed my mind." She reached over and took his hand, "You are a pretty big man, but you've always been very gentle around me," she smiled, "And your sister seems to think the sun rises and sets on you."

He chuckled, "That's because I spoil her rotten."

"You wouldn't know it, she certainly doesn't act spoiled."

"No?"

"Lisa, my best friend is indulged by her father, and sometimes she takes that for granted. Although she does admit she can be a snob and she has never treated me disrespectfully, so I never have let it bother me. Anyway, she wouldn't even consider working for me let alone volunteering so I can have a day off."

"Lisa is Ted's daughter." Gage stopped the frown that started. That was the young girl that had been shamelessly throwing herself at him whenever she came to the station to visit her father.

She grinned seeing his expression, "You've met."

"Mia—"

"Don't worry Gage, she's harmless." Mia absently leaned down and kissed him. It was meant to be a quick peck but his hand circled around her head and drove the kiss further. Caught totally off guard by the man's talent with his mouth, she let herself get lost in it. In the back of her mind she could hear mewling noises and it took a moment for her to realize they came from her. Now he had her head cupped in his large hands

to guide her mouth on his and she found herself stretching out next to him.

“God Mia, you must be the sexiest woman alive.” He breathed against her mouth, “I’m trying not to touch you with all the willpower in me and one simple gesture like that shatters my resistance. We’ve got to stop.”

“Gage—I—” she stuttered feeling a little foolish at starting it.

He noticed her rising blush, “Honey, don’t you dare get embarrassed. You can kiss me anytime, anywhere, but not right now. I told you before, that I wanted you badly, but this is too soon.” He gently lifted her back from him and sat up.

Mia also sat straight and stared at him, “You don’t make any sense to me. I mean—look at you,” she waved an arm at him, “Everything about you is perfect. You could have any woman, yet you ask me out, and you don’t take advantage of my vulnerability towards you.”

He groaned, “Perfect? There’s that honesty again. Mia, I know you’re special, and I intend to treat you just like you deserve. There’s absolutely no shame in waiting. ”

“You certainly aren’t like anyone I’m used to.”

“Hell, I hope not.” He added with an amused smile. He studied her for a moment thinking he had to get out of there or he was going to flatten her out on the blanket and bury himself in her. He forced a smile, “Come, I’ve got to get you home before your father sends out half the police force looking for us. It’s after midnight.” He stood and held out his hand.

Smiling she accepted it and let him help her to her feet. Yet he didn’t move. He just stood there staring down at her with an unreadable expression. “What is it?” A slow grin spread across his face.

“On second thought—” he pulled her against him and covered her mouth with his. He felt her melt against him. One

of his hands wrapped around her while the other slowly slid down her backside. He couldn't ignore the fact that she felt so perfect, so soft against him. Too damn perfect. His hand curved around her derriere and he groaned against her mouth. It was no less than what he thought it would be, round perfect, and firm. Despite his forwardness with her, she didn't protest. In fact his mouth muffled her gasp as he cupped her bottom and pulled her tight against his obvious arousal. When her arms slid around his neck, he knew he could get away with just about anything with her and thrust his tongue between her lips and caressed hers.

"Oh God—" she groaned

"Hell yeah." He answered taking her mouth again bending her back over his arm. Never in his life could he remember a woman tasting so sweet. This woman had surpassed all of his expectations so far and quite frankly he was so hot for her, he nearly forgot that she was untried. Reluctantly he released her, but she still managed to look entirely too damn sensual. Her eyes were closed and her mouth had a bit of a pout, "Christ Mia, I'm thinking if I don't get you home in the next few minutes, I'm going to be in a lot of trouble."

She flicked open her eyes and centered them on his, "Trouble?"

He grinned, "You have no idea of the images that are swimming through my mind at this moment at the things I want to do to you."

She smiled back, "I swear you can make a nun feel desirable." This got her a deep throaty chuckle.

"Again, the honesty." He sighed heavily, "I should be arrested for what I was thinking, but then again—" his eyes guided over her, "—It would be well worth it."

"Oh dear." She said breathlessly.

He grinned, "Enough talk before I follow through on my

thoughts.” He reached down and grabbed her hand, “Let’s get you home.”

George was waiting up when the jeep pulled into the drive. He had turned all the lights out and watched through the window. When Gage leaned over to the passenger seat and cupped a hand behind his daughter’s head so he could kiss her, he nearly grabbed his rifle, but he had to think of Mia. She really liked this man no matter how unsettled he felt about him. He watched as Gage chucked her under the chin before she got out of the jeep and waved at him. Quickly he rushed up the stairs to his room so she didn’t know that he watched her. He felt quite guilty at spying on her but he was genuinely concerned.

Gage pulled out of the driveway and headed back toward home when his cell phone rang.

“Gage.” He said when he answered it. He paused as he listened to the voice on the other end, “Yes General. I heard you.” He paused again, “She’s fine,” he grinned to himself, “Very fine.” He laughed this time, “Yeah I’m behaving myself. I swear to God, it would be easier to hold back the light of day than this. After this we are definitely even, especially if you knew what restraint him using and that picture you have of her doesn’t do her justice, but I’m staying close to her. George suspects something he doesn’t know exactly what.” He stopped to listen again, “Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind, bye General.” He flipped the phone closed and tossed it on the passenger seat. He’d meant what he said about holding back the light of day. More than anything tonight he wanted to lay her out on that blanket and make her his, but his superior would most likely cut his balls off—literally. If it wasn’t for General Thomas, and the respect he had for the man, he would have. The woman was so damn desirable that he had difficulty thinking of anything else.

The next day Mia was hanging laundry out on the clothesline when Lisa came around the back of the house. “Hi

Lisa."

"Who's your best friend?" she said angrily.

"What?" she said pulling a sheet aside and looking at the other woman as she put her hands on her hips and tapped her foot.

"I find out from Charlie who found out from Liam, that you are dating the hot new deputy!"

Mia studied her friend for a moment and then she saw the smile tug at the corner of her mouth before Mia realized that she was teasing her, "I don't know if you'd say we were dating. It was only two dates and I have been very busy."

"No doubt," she laughed, finally breaking her stern composure, "A man like that would keep me busy too."

"Not like that." She quickly defended.

"Oh puh-leese. Even Miss goodie two shoes couldn't resist that stunning hunk."

Mia rolled her eyes, "I'm not discussing this with you." However a blush still managed to make its way into her cheeks.

"Oh God! Tell me!" she grabbed Mia's arm, "Obviously there was something from your expression."

"He did kiss me." She confessed sheepishly.

"That's it?" she said with disappointment. "There's nothing else, like he's built like a Greek God and his tongue is orgasmic—"

"Why do I tell you anything?" she rolled her eyes.

Lisa giggled, "You're crushing my fantasies."

"Go play with your own beau." She offered while picking up her laundry basket, "Geesh Lisa!"

"Been there, done that!"

"Oh God, I give up." Mia exclaimed, "You can come in as long as we don't talk about Gage or your sex life." When she didn't answer, Mia shot her an exasperated look causing Lisa to laugh.

“Fine, truce. I promise.” She held up her hands in surrender and followed her in the house. “But you have to tell me how he asked you out at least.”

“Fine.” Said Mia with a smile and relayed the first time she met him and how he asked her out.

“Wow, a man who takes charge. That’s kind of a turn on. I bet he likes to be on top—or better yet, doggy style is so hot--”

“Stop!” Mia said holding up her hand and wincing, “I can’t take this. I shouldn’t have told you anything.”

Lisa only laughed not the least bit embarrassed, “Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.”

“You would think so.”

“Don’t lie and tell me you don’t think about it.” Lisa went to the fridge and pulled out a jug of lemonade to pour herself a glass. “Do you want one?”

“No, and maybe I do think he’s appealing but I’m worried that I’m just a passing fancy.” *Very very appealing*, she said to herself.

“Oh,” she Lisa grinned as she turned around and leaned against the counter taking a drink from her glass, “I don’t think so.” Her eyes glinted as she stared at her friend over the rim.

Mia tilted her head curiously at her friend’s expression, “What do you know that you are not telling me?”

Her eyes brightened, “Well—it seems a certain Deputy Chief, not that I’m saying any names—”

“My God Lisa there’s only one!” she laughed.

“—anyway,” she continued with a smile, “This certain man has threatened every other eligible bachelor in the police station.”

“You lie!” she blurted in disbelief.

“I’m not!” said Lisa in mock indignation, “Apparently he told Justin, who told Liam that Gage threatened to break his teeth if he so much as looked at you.”

Mia's mouth hung open, "he said that?"

"Well—this is through gossip and sometimes men are worse than women in that area, but I'm sure it was pretty close along those lines." She studied her friend's surprised expression, "One thing's for sure, that guy has it bad for you."

Mia could barely contain the thrill that went through her. If Lisa's information was right, then she realized that Gage really cared about her as much as she was finding herself caring about him.

"Now, we need to talk about me." Said Lisa seeing her friend's expression. "First of all, I'm so jealous of this hottie chasing you like you're the last morsel on earth—" that caused Mia to laugh, "—secondly, I want you to come to the party I'm holding at my house next week when my Dad and your dad go to Arizona for that food convention or whatever it's called. Dad's only going because he likes the golfing there and because he and George are such good friends they're making a vacation out of it."

"Oh I totally forgot about that." Her father mentioned it to her last month.

"Another thing is bring this man of yours."

"He might be working, and I don't know if I'll be feeling up to it after working all day. Someone needs to cover for Dad's absence at the diner."

"Mia, you are my best friend and I want you to come. It won't be any fun without you." Lisa pouted.

"I'll see. I'll know more when the time comes."

"Fair enough, but I'm going to hound you to go."

Gage wasn't in a good mood when he returned to the police station that afternoon. Domestic disputes always got him riled, especially when it was so close to home for him. To see a man beat the living snot out of his wife was inexcusable. Thankfully Justin was with him, because he ended up knocking

the man flat and Justin prevented him from pounding on him even more. It was particularly rough because there was a five year old boy who had witnessed his drunken father beat the crap out of his wife.

Gage had whipped the man down on the ground like he was born to it when he had the gall to come after him with a knife. It made him feel good to put his knee on the guy's back and cuff him telling him to stay put or he'll do to him what he did to his wife.

"I'm charging you with assault," the man screamed from his place on the ground at Gage.

"Try it!" said Justin, "And I'll testify that you swung first." He gave Gage a look of triumph after the man shut his mouth and looked between the two.

"You're lucky I didn't kill you after what you did to her." Gage said in disgust as he turned and went back into the house to talk to his wife.

The ambulance came and after the paramedics assessed her they took her to the hospital. She had a broken arm and a few busted ribs. Shortly after, Gage found the little boy hiding in the closet and called social services.

The mood he was in quickly changed when he spotted Mia coming through the door and scanning the room. Then her eyes found him and her whole face lit up. He felt himself smile back at her. She had no idea how she affected him in that moment and her presence was a godsend after today. Not only did she look stunning in a flowery summer dress, but she instantly brightened up the room. It didn't take long for him to notice that the other men saw her too and that familiar surge of jealousy and possessiveness went through him like a light beam as they all shouted out their greetings. He wasn't used to those feelings, but he certainly wasn't going to question them. It was obvious this girl was special and he wasn't about to let her go for

anything. He watched as she shyly clasped her hands in front of her as he made his way toward her.

"Hi."

"Hi sweetheart. What do I owe the pleasure?"

She shrugged and looked around them. It seemed like everyone stopped what they were doing to stare at the both of them. She remembered what Lisa told her about Gage threatening the men and wondered if it was true. "I feel like I'm in my fourth grade play again." She was so nervous up on stage, but regardless she managed to play her part, but now it felt no different with all eyes on the two of them.

He bent his head toward her and spoke softly so no one could hear him, "You can't blame them honey, you light up a room." She blushed in response, "Come." He said taking her hand, "We'll talk in my office."

After he shut the door, he turned to her, "What do I owe this surprise?"

"Well—Lisa was over to the house today. She's having a party next week and was wondering if we'd go."

"Next week?"

She nodded.

"Sit down." He said as he pulled a chair forward for her and sat on the edge of his desk, "I've been meaning to talk to you."

She felt dread go through her. This was it, he was going to tell her he didn't want to see her anymore. Her heart started pounding in her chest and suddenly she felt sick to her stomach.

"Honey—" he said looking at her alarmed expression, "Don't worry. I just wanted you to know that I'll be out of town next week for a couple of days." He bent over and cupped her face in his large hands, "You need to quit worrying about us." His eyes searched her worried expression, "I'm in no hurry to lose you especially since I just got you." He released her and sat

straight.

“Are you really leaving? But Ted’s gone too and—”

“Merrill’s in charge. He’s perfectly capable to mind the station for two days. Now about this party at Lisa’s. I’d prefer if you didn’t go by yourself. I’ll try and be back that day to take you.” He reached for a pen and paper and scribbled something on it before he gave it to her, “this is my private mobile number. You can call me anytime I’m away.”

She took the paper. “Lisa’s my best friend Gage; she already made me feel like a heel over not wanting to go.” She explained.

“Mia, I’d really prefer if you didn’t go. There’ll probably be a lot of inebriated men there, and I can’t help but know that you’ll be pawed to death if I’m not around. I’m not so old to remember what those parties are like.”

“Gage, I’m perfectly capable of sticking up for myself.”

“Of course you are.” He interjected with a quirk of his sensuous mouth, “So tell me, when was the last time you had to deal with a hoard of drunken men?”

Now she saw his point. “I’m not as naïve as you think.” She said with slight defensiveness.

“No, you’re probably more so.” He said with a glint of amusement. “All I ask is that you think about it and at least call me to let me know either way. All right?”

“I suppose.” She looked at her watch, “I’ve got to go. I told Dad I would only be a few minutes.”

“In a minute.” He grinned reaching down and taking her hand, jerking her up between his knees into his embrace, “I need a kiss before you leave.”

She couldn’t help but give him a stunning smile, “I’m not going to argue.”

“It wouldn’t do you any good anyway.” He said bending his head toward hers.

"My you are demanding." She whispered against his mouth right before it took hers. The kiss he gave her was more than a mere kiss, and it was more than demanding. It was possessive, hot, and entirely mind blowing. Her hands spanned across his muscular thighs and traced a path up his hips, over his firm abdomen and to his chest where her palms flattened against the bulge of his pectorals. His body had always been a fascination to her from the first day she saw him in his swimming shorts. It was hard earned, not one that was formed in a gym five days a week. The tan he sported told her that.

He lifted his head and stared down at her dazed expression, "Damn honey, I'm going to miss you."

"For two days." She murmured causing him to give her one of the sinful grins she'd come to love.

"Two days too long."

"Is this business?"

"Sort of, and personal." Her expression faltered and he immediately knew what she was thinking, "No, honey, it's not a woman, there's only one woman in my life." He brushed his mouth across hers. Trust me." Then he tenderly brushed an unruly tendril of hair off her cheek and framed her face in his hands so she'd look at him, "I've got what I want right here. Don't ever worry about that."

She felt foolish for even thinking it after that affectionate display. Why the hell was she so insecure about their relationship? She had never really been insecure about much in her life, but then again, this man who consistently told her that he was attractive to her, didn't make any sense. After all, he was gorgeous and Mia never dreamt in a million years someone like him would find her attractive. Yet she really didn't know him all that well, and also she didn't want to pry and ask him where he was going because again, she didn't want to come across needy. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He said seriously, "I would wonder the same thing with you."

"Really?"

"Yes, now—" he affectionately patted her bottom knowing she wouldn't protest, "You go back to work before I take the rest of the day off and drag you back to my place." Her eyes widened, "I'm tempted honey after that kiss, now go." He grinned as he released her.

"Oh, such threats." She teased as he stood up and opened the door for her. "I'm sure that sends every woman running for cover." It was just the opposite and they both knew it.

"Yeah, well, you'll find out soon enough." He said seductively, "Now go before I change my mind. What did I tell you about teasing the carnivores?"

She laughed and left his office waving at people and cast him a final glance before going through the doors and out of sight.

"Damn." He released a long frustrated breath. He definitely had to talk to the General about her, because his willpower was crumbling to dust. In view of that, he was thankful to get out of town and meet the man in Seattle for a few days just to get away from her. Maybe he could put things into perspective if she wasn't around. Hell, he doubted it.

The next week went slowly for both of them. Mia was putting in long days at the diner and Gage, as usual would pop in at lunch to see her, but it was always late when she got out of there and she was exhausted. Although she still wanted to see him, he seemed to make excuses using her long days at the diner, but he still phoned her every night. On Wednesday, he left for Seattle but not before calling her and telling her that he'd hopefully be back on Friday to take her to Lisa's party.

Mia couldn't help but wonder if it was something

personal to do with a woman even though he told her it wasn't. Regardless, it almost seemed like he was avoiding her, but his phone calls told her something different. He was so affectionate and tender when he spoke to her and as far as she could tell, he wasn't lying. Glancing up at the clock, she knew his plane was taking off from the airport and it bothered her. She felt almost empty knowing he wouldn't be in town for a few days.

Chapter Three

People who Knew Gage in Scott Springs wouldn't recognize the man that came off the plane at the Seattle airport. His long legged stride was the same along with his confident posture, but it was the hardened expression on his handsome face that would throw them. His intelligent eyes were devoid of any hint of emotion and the firm set of his jaw even told strangers that this was a man who was to be reckoned with. However, his posture and radiating air of authority had no problem drawing female eyes as he walked steadily through the building, but he ignored them. It was the sexual charisma he gave off that attracted them even if he didn't wear the four thousand dollar navy three piece suit he had on now. Regardless, he wasn't there to attract a woman, not this time anyway. He already had one that is if he could get approval from the General.

Thaddeus Thomas met Gage at the airport. They shook hands and Thad gave Gage an affectionate pat on the shoulder.

"How is she?" he asked eagerly.

"Beautiful." He answered honestly.

Thad shot him a sideways glance as they walked side by side leaving the terminal. "Is that right?"

"We need to talk."

"I see that." He waved down a taxi, "When we get to our hotel."

"I'm fine with that. Jesus I could really use a cigarette." Gage said as the taxi pulled away from the curb.

"I thought you quit?"

He grinned, "I did."

"Are you telling me that she has you that worked up?" The older man said with surprise.

"In spades."

"Christ." Thad said calmly and reached inside of his suit jacket, "Here." He flicked open the top of his cigarette carton and offered him a one.

"Thanks." Gage said as he took it knowing he couldn't smoke in the cab, so he leaned his head back on the seat and waited until they were at their hotel.

At the hotel, Gage got out of the cab and grabbed his bag while Thad pulled out a cigarette of his own and lit them both.

Gage took a long draw off of his before he spoke. His eyes searched out his superior's, "I need permission to be with her."

Thad shook his head, "Absolutely not."

"You know I'm the best one to protect her. Give me this." Gage argued.

"Don't pull that shit on me. I'll replace you in a heartbeat." He gritted out, "Or I'll have you shot."

Gage snorted knowing damn well he wouldn't, "I'm your best man."

"That's debatable at this moment. I didn't send you there to get laid!"

This time Gage's anger showed. His eyes darkened and narrowed. "It's not like that."

Thad studied Gage for a moment unmoved by his change in mood, "Then what's it like?"

He ran his hand through his hair and took another long drag off the cigarette before tossing it on the ground with a

curse and twisting the toe of his boot over it.

"Convince me Gage." Thad said after he realized that Gage wasn't going to say anything.

Gage nodded and faced the older man again, "She's really sweet."

"So was her mother."

"yeah, well, I didn't know her mother." He said sarcastically. This whole conversation was entirely too uncomfortable for him and from the smile that just appeared on the General's face, he knew it.

"Gage, she doesn't know anything about you or why you're in Scott Springs."

"Yes, I know."

"If she finds out, she might not be too happy that I sent you." He studied the younger man's expression for a moment before he spoke again, "You're really falling for her aren't you."

"She's as sweet as hell." He repeated, "I never met anyone like her."

"That's not what I asked." He said sternly.

"Yeah General, I am." He finally said.

"I chose you because you were the strongest of your team."

"I know that, but give me a war any day over this."

"Oh, hell." Thad said looking at the younger man.

"So it seems you're in a dilemma."

"I am."

"I can see that you care about her Gage, but there are other things at stake here. I don't want her hurt—"

"I won't hurt her." He interrupted.

"Just being who you are will hurt her. She doesn't know that you're a mercenary. She doesn't know I asked you to watch her, or anything about your past."

"I've thought of that in great detail."

"Or," he added, "The things you'll be doing in the future."

"I'll give it up." He said without hesitation.

The general's brows rose, "Tell me I'm hallucinating?"

Gage shrugged, "I'm ready to give it up. Scott Springs is a nice place. I like my job, I like the people there, especially Mia. I'm wealthy beyond my means, so money is not an issue."

"—and your team?"

"I think they'll understand once they meet her." He paused, "That's if you still want me to bring her to North Carolina next week."

"Yeah I do." He answered, "Its about time she knows who I am."

Gage nodded, "When's the hearing?"

"Friday morning. I don't think we'll have a hope in hell."

Gage nodded studying his superior's expression for a moment, "I'm falling in love with her." He raised his hand to stop the older man from talking, "Look, I know this is hard to take, but think about how it affected me when I figured it out. She woke something up in me general and I'm not that stupid to look a gift horse in the mouth."

Thad considered this for a few minutes while Gage waited patiently. Finally, he nodded and tossed his cigarette on the ground putting it out with the heel of his shoe, "For that reason, I'm going to grant you your request. That way you can stay close to her." He brought his gaze back to Gage's, "but if I found out that you've hurt her in any way, I'll have the men drop you out of a plane without a parachute. Is that understood Sergeant?"

"It is." He couldn't help but smile.

The two days that Gage was gone, Mia was miserable. She missed him terribly. At least she had to work at the diner because her father had gone to Arizona with Teddy and it kept her mind off of him periodically. What was wrong with her? She

hardly knew him, but she felt obsessed constantly thinking about him.

Then on Friday the party at Lisa's house wasn't what Mia expected. Lisa had been keeping her glass full all night with some sort of alcohol and encouraged her to drink the contents and before long, Mia wasn't feeling very good and made her way into Lisa's room to get away from the noise and the crowd. She shut the door and sat on the edge of the bed with her face in her hands. Now she realized she shouldn't have come. This wasn't her scene, it never was but she felt pressured into celebrating Lisa's nineteenth birthday while both their parents were out of town.

Just then the door opened and Liam entered, "Hey honey, are you feeling all right? Lisa saw you come up here and asked me to check on you."

"Not really." She looked up at him.

He pursed his lips, "You don't look well. Maybe I should take you home."

"Lisa will be mad at me."

"I'll talk to her, don't worry." He sat down beside her and put an arm around her shoulders, "Do you feel like you're going to be sick?"

"No, I did, but it's gone now. I think I will let you take—Liam?" she locked gazes with his. His thumb was caressing the nape of her neck.

"I've always wondered what you felt like." He said, bringing his other hand to her jaw, "Among other things."

Her eyes widened, and she flattened her palms against his chest, "Wait—"

"No—Mia, you're so beautiful." He said crushing her mouth under his and flattening her out on the bed at the same time. She could taste whiskey on his breath and realized that he

wasn't as sober as she thought he was.

Her muffled cry didn't get past his mouth as her palms pushed against his chest. She finally turned her head to the side, "Stop!" she squirmed under him.

"you feel so damn good." He groaned as if he didn't hear her.

"Liam please." She pleaded causing him to finally raise his head and look at her.

Tears coursed down her cheeks, "Oh Christ! What the hell am I—" his voice was cut off by the door splintering open.

Seconds later Mia felt him being lifted off of her and saw Gage with the most menacing look on his face shove Liam against the wall then grab him by the throat. She screamed.

"You son of a bitch!" he ground out, "I told you to leave her alone!"

"Gage!" Mia jumped off the bed and wrapped her hands around his arm, "Let him go! You're hurting him." It would have been easier to hold back the tide than his arm she realized, because he moved as if he didn't even feel her, slamming Liam back against the wall again. Mia could see his skin turn red as he tried to breathe.

"No more than he was doing to you." He said without taking his eyes off of Liam who was struggling for a breath.

"He's drunk! God let him go, he stopped—he really did." She defended. This brought his gaze to hers. Slowly his eyes lightened and after a brief pause, he nodded and released Liam who slumped to the floor holding his throat and gasping for air.

"I'm sorry Gage—" he managed, "I don't know what got into me."

"You touch her again—" he stuck a finger toward him, "I'll fucking kill you Liam!" He waited until Liam nodded that he heard him before he turned away and grabbed Mia's arm, "You're leaving." He half dragged her out of the house and didn't

stop until he deposited her in his jeep and got in the driver's seat. His eyes were unreadable as he studied her, "How much have you had to drink?"

"Too much." She leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes.

"This is the last time you go to Lisa's parties." He said tersely.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. "Gage—I—"

"Mia, I found my girlfriend under a co-worker in her best friend's bed. I'm a little angry right now."

She sat up straight, "Wait a minute! Do you think I welcomed his advances?" The silence was filled with angst as she waited for his response, and he took his time answering her causing her heightening concern.

"No." she visibly slumped in relief. "However, before you think I don't blame you for some of this, you're dead wrong. Firstly, you shouldn't have come here. You know what Lisa is like. Secondly, you didn't tell me a damn thing!"

"I called, you didn't answer your phone Gage." She defended, "I talked to Jane when I phoned the house. She said she'd tell you." His brows shot up.

"You did?"

She nodded.

He swore, "She didn't tell me and she's staying at a friend's tonight." He held his hand up when she was going to say something, "thirdly, you're stinking loaded."

"that was my fault." She said shamefully, "Lisa kept filling my cup."

"That girl is going to be talked to by her father and when I'm through with her she'll be scared into a new religion." this confession made her eyes go wide. "It's time she grew up or got spanked, because she certainly doesn't act her age. Now, as for you—" he moved his eyes over her, "—You're coming home with

me.”

“What?”

He started the jeep and pulled away from the curb, “You heard me Mia.”

Mia just stared at him as he focused on the road. She was speechless. What did he expect from her? Sex? Oh God, she thought, he couldn’t possibly—he was so angry.

‘Whatever you’re thinking, you’re right.’ He said flicking her a glance, “I’m through playing the gentleman. Especially after tonight. I’m going to show you exactly why I think your mine Mia.”

“Gage I told you that—”

“Enough Mia!” he said followed by a sharp glare. “You’ve been insinuating for weeks now that you want me—”

“Not like this—you’re angry.”

He swore, “Damn rights I am—I keep seeing you under Liam.” He swore again.

“Gage—” she reached out and touched his arm, “Please, you’re scaring me.”

He took a deep breath and counted to ten. He knew how menacing he could look when he was angry. He pulled over to the side of the road and put the vehicle into park. Then he faced her, but this time he was calm. It wasn’t her he was really angry with and he really didn’t mean to frighten her. “okay, you’re right Mia. The last thing I want to do is frighten you.”

She nodded, searching his expression.

He reached over and took her hand kissing the palm. “I’ve missed you honey. Come home with me.” His other hand reached over and caressed her jaw, “You know we’ll be good together. Can’t you feel that electricity between us?”

“I do.” She mouthed, “I really do.”

“Come here.” He said curling his hand around to the back of her head to pull mouth to his.

Mia could have felt her toes curl with the way his tongue worked hers. He took his time enticing her with his mouth, nibbling and suckling her bottom lip until she felt heat flush through her lower pelvis making her gasp against his mouth. Finally he lifted his head and gave her one of those jaw dropping sexy grins.

She never said anything because she was literally kissed speechless.

He seemed to know and without a word, turned, started the vehicle and pulled back out onto the road towards Evan Parson's ranch.

He pulled in front of his house and got out, walked around to the passenger side and helped her down before taking her hand and leading her into his house.

"Gage, I'm—well, I'm a little scared." she confessed.

He smiled down at her, "I promise that nothing will happen that you don't want to happen. If you just want me to hold you, I will. However, I know that I missed you more than anything else in my life the two days I've been gone. You monopolize my thoughts to the point of almost making me insane, and you must be possibly the most beautiful woman that I've ever laid eyes on."

She felt her heart soar at that confession, "Really?"

He bent his head and brushed his mouth across hers, "Yes." He said smiling against her mouth, "Now, come on." He took her hand and led her into the house.

Once inside his room, he turned to her and pushed her back against the door bringing his mouth down on hers possessively. It took a fraction of the time he thought it would for her to begin to respond. Maybe it was the alcohol or maybe the passion he'd seen in those blue eyes of hers. Regardless, he felt a surge of triumph as he reached down and easily lifted her off her feet to carry her to his bed. He knelt in the center, laid

her down and brought his weight down on top of her while taking her mouth again.

She fit perfectly under him, soft and supple. He nudged her legs apart and moved his hardness against her belly causing her to hesitate.

“Gage.” She gasped stiffening at the intimate contact. She could feel the length of his erection against her and it momentarily brought her back to reality.

He paused and looked down at her. Then he sat back on his heels and pulled her up with him, “Okay Mia, we’ll slow down.” He said brushing her hair off her shoulders so it cascaded down her back. “We have all night together.”

“Okay.” She said softly. She really wanted him but she was also frightened.

“You start honey.”

“Start?”

He nodded with a smile and took her hands placing them on his shirt, “Take my shirt off.”

She felt herself smile but it was more unsure compared to his confident one. Slowly she started undoing the buttons of his shirt. He never helped her, nor said a word but she could feel the heat of his eyes on her face. However, she forgot about it when she finished unbuttoning his shirt and moved her hands up his bare chest to push it off his shoulders, “Gage, you’re so perfect.” She whispered. Even though she never forgot how he looked when they went swimming, she never got to touch him like she did now.

He chuckled and reached over to grip her hips and pull her closer to him, “My turn.” He murmured and undid the buttons of her blouse mimicking her movement and pushing it off her shoulders revealing a lacy pink bra, “that’s damn sexy.” He said roving his eyes over her.

She felt herself flush,

His hands slid up her sides to cup her breasts and she gasped but didn't pull back. His eyes went to hers as he reached behind her and undid the clasp and pull it off her shoulders. He tossed the lacy garment aside and lowered his eyes to her chest, "When I saw you in that bikini two weeks ago, I knew then you had a beautiful body."

She flushed, "Gage—"

"Don't be embarrassed Mia, you're exquisite."

"I'm nervous." She breathed.

"I'll take care of that." He said deeply leaning down toward her and taking her mouth again.

Mia moved her arms around his neck and threaded her fingers in his hair. Gage had this unequalled talent of making her forget herself when he kissed her and as soon as he involved that hot experienced tongue, she practically forgot her own name.

Gage bent her back over his arm and lowered his head to her breasts. This time when she said his name there was no hesitation in it. She tightened her fingers in his hair painfully as he flattened her out on the mattress and moved himself back in between her thighs. Quite frankly he found her aggressiveness a turn on and it took some willpower not to lose his patience and plunge into her endlessly. He needed to make sure that she was ready for him so he didn't frighten her.

Mia heard herself moan feeling the pressure of his hard body on hers. When he took one of her breasts in his mouth she started making louder noises as he teased and tortured her with it. Now she knew what Lisa meant by an orgasmic tongue, but everything about this man was orgasmic, his hands, his mouth and his whole darn body for that matter. Then he started moving on top of her so she could feel every sinewy muscle of his bare top against her chest and abdomen while his mouth travelled back up to hers. This time she met his tongue with

hers and there was no more encouragement needed to overcome her fears because she no longer had any. Suddenly he lifted up and away from her.

It was the worst empty feeling ever, “No—”

“Just a minute honey,” Gage said his voice sounding rough with desire. “I need to get my pants off.” He quickly stripped off the rest of his clothing then pulled off her skirt and panties before coming back down on her again. This time she was eager for his weight and instantly wrapped her limbs around him causing him to growl roughly.

If that deep throated sound was supposed to excite her, it certainly worked. Gage was completely masculine to the core and obviously he did know exactly what to do with a woman, even one as inexperienced as herself.

Then he shifted and lifted himself so he could ease into her, “Mia open your eyes and look at me.” He rasped.

Mia didn’t even realize that her eyes were closed until he told her to open them. Then he thrust his hips down and she felt a sharp pain rivet through her causing her to cry out.

Gage stilled and kissed her tenderly, and gently brushed the hair off her wet cheeks, “Shhh baby, it’s done.” He kissed her again and managed to lift his hips and slide further into her, “No more pain. I promise.”

She nodded and took a deep breath as it began to subside.

“Here—” he slide a hand down to grasp her thigh and pull it up past his waist, “It’ll help.” He brushed his lips across her wet cheek as he reached down and did the same with her other leg, “there.” Then he carefully pulled back and pushed deeper into her. This time she gasped. “See?” her eyes filled with wonder as he continued the slow rocking until he felt her arch toward him. Only then did he increased the force and speed of his rhythm

"Oh God!" she groaned, "Gage—" she lifted her head and dug her nails into his shoulders.

He lifted himself above her by placing his hands on either side of her head to get better momentum and seized her mouth with his as he felt his rising climax. He knew she was close by the tightening of her thighs on his waist and the force of her nails down his back. Not only that the mewling noises she began to make pushed him over the edge. He released her mouth to groan his release at that exact moment she gasped and arched toward him in a spasm of her own. Once more he pushed deeply into her draining the last climax before collapsing on top of her with a satiated groan. She was his, all his. Every inch of her belonged to him now, and he was not letting her go. He'd meant every word he told the General the day before about wanting her. She shifted her hips slightly and he groaned again. "Baby you need to lay still for a moment." He said roughly or he was going to have her all over again. He could still feel himself throb within her as small ripples of pleasure still pulsed through him. Maybe it was her innocence that made him feel so close to her, or maybe it was the enticing body, or her sweet personality. Whatever the reason, she had woken something inside of him that actually caused him to really care for her.

Mia was dealing with her own astonishment of what they just shared. She never knew it could be that way between two people. "Lay still?" she heard herself say.

He lifted his head and grinned down at her, "Yes, or I'm going to have you again."

Her eyes widened and then she felt herself smile.

"don't start," he said narrowing his gaze, "Honey, you need time to rest. You must be sore."

"I don't know." She said honestly, "I'm still in shock."

He groaned and lowered his head kissing her tenderly. Then he rolled to his side and pulled her too him, "Damn." He said, "I

agree. That *was* hot.”

She smiled against his chest and the hair tickled her nose.

He pulled back and tilted her head up to look at him, “Are you okay Mia?”

“More than you know.” She said with a grin.

“God help me, I love your honesty.” He chuckled, “But seriously, did I hurt you.”

“I’ll be okay. I’m a little sore, but you were right. It did pass—God did it ever!” she added with awe.

This time he laughed, “You do wonders for a man’s sex appeal honey.” He kissed her forehead, “However you also exhausted the hell out of me. Go to sleep.”

Like he needed it, she thought, *wow*. “As you wish.” She moved up tighter against him and he circled his strong arms around her keeping her there. Soon after they both fell asleep.

“Mia.”

It seemed like his voice was in the distant and soon she realized where she was. She opened her eyes to see Gage staring back at her, “Hmm—what time is it?” she said seeing that there was barely any light in the room. Her eyes went to the window and saw the first hint of day in the sky.

“Five thirty.” It was unusual for him to wake up with a woman in his bed, and in the past when he did, he couldn’t wait to get rid of them, but this one, he was willing to keep forever. Also he wasn’t used to waking up with a rock hard erection after the night they had together either, and there was no way in hell he was getting up without satisfying his lust. With the soft exquisite body beside him, he intended to do just that.

She groaned, “five thirty?”

“Honey,” he pushed her onto her back, “I’ve got to be at work by seven.” He leaned down and kissed her, “So that gives me just about one hour to ravish you again, “So wake the hell

up.”

She smiled, “One hour? Mister—you are in for a treat.” She slid her arms around his neck as he growled and moved ontop of her.

An hour and a half later Gage kissed her passionately when he dropped her off at her house.

“I’ll call you later.”

She smiled rather shyly and nodded.

“Are you sure I wasn’t too rough?” he lowered his head to meet her eyes.

“No, you were very gentle.” She managed through her shyness and leaned over to kiss him, “Thank you for that.” She turned and got out of the Jeep. She stood in the driveway and watched him pull away before she went into the house. There were three messages on the answering machine, all from Lisa, but she was too tired to call her and she probably wasn’t even up yet. Chances were she heard about the scene at her house and wanted to see if she was okay.

Tossing her purse on the side table she went up to her room and lay on her bed. Gage had thoroughly exhausted her and she was still not feeling well from the consumption of alcohol the night before. It was a while before she fell to sleep because the images of their bodies together kept surfacing in her mind causing her body to tingle and butterflies to flit about in her stomach.

At noon she heard a vehicle in the driveway and saw Gage’s police car through the window. Rushing down the stairs, she got to the door just as he was opening the screen. Neither one of them said a word, but she might have if he didn’t suddenly grab her and crush her mouth under his. However, if she had any words to say they dissolved when his hands slid her dress up her thighs and pinned her against the wall.

“I’ve missed you.” He said hoarsely against her mouth.

Her only response was an agreeable moan as he lifted her on his hips after the distinct sound of his belt getting undone followed by the rasp of the zipper of his uniform pants, because he'd smothered her mouth with his again.

He cupped her bottom and groaned as his fingers slid into the distinct shape of her thong panties, "How fucking sexy," he murmured and quickly made a small obstacle out of them before he guided her onto his shaft. The exquisite moan that escaped her parted lips at the invasion, nearly had him come undone. It had made him impatient though, and he thought he might have been a little rough until the sexy noises began spilling out of her. Then she shoved her fingers into his hair to pull his mouth closer to hers. Christ, she was like a wildcat, he thought while she heightened his desire to possess her. He never thought he had it so good and he'd had plenty of women to compare her to, but they didn't hold a candle to her. Afterward he would remember thinking that it was good for them that Mia and her dad lived in a isolated area because the noises they were making would have brought the house down if it wasn't so firmly rooted to the foundation.

Her shouts were drowned out by his as he exploded in her while burying his face in her neck and shoving himself as far in her as he could possibly get. After a moment he knew he probably left bruises of his fingers on her hips.

"I think I died." She managed to say

"Me and you both baby." He breathed into her neck. "I honestly didn't come to here to make love to you—" he paused lifting his head and looking over her at the wall. then he grinned, "—against the wall of all places."

She smiled, "Well maybe if you sucked at it, I would have stopped you." She moved and flinched.

"What is it?"

"Something's poking my thigh," she giggled.

He eased away from her and chuckled, "My gun." Gripping her waist, he lifted her off of him like she weighed nothing and set her down gently. However, he didn't release her. He bent his head down and took her mouth with his, "God I've never tasted anything as sweet as you." He kissed her again, "Anyway, I came here," he lifted his head and gave her a sexy grin as he reached down to do up his pants with a rattle of metal followed by the rasp of his zipper, "To ask you if you'd come with me to my grandfather's birthday celebration next week."

"Here?"

"No, North Carolina." He answered

"Oh." She said apprehensively, "I don't know how dad will take this."

"I'll speak to him." He said as he reached over and adjusted the lines of her dress, trying his best to set her right. Then after a slight hesitation he pulled her back into his embrace to kiss her again, "This has got to be a sickness." He smiled against her lips.

"I agree." She murmured back.

"You so belong to me." He groaned and kissed her again.

"Am I interrupting?" George said after clearing his throat. He tried to keep the anger and the astonishment out of his voice and his expression. He'd come up the steps and what he saw through the screen door didn't please him in the least. His daughter was in a rather intimate embrace with the Deputy and they were kissing. Of course he'd expected this from them, they were both young and clearly attracted to one another, but to see it was a different state of mind. He still thought of her as a little girl despite how beautiful and intelligent she was.

Both of them swung their heads toward the door as George came in and set his luggage in the hall. He noticed the guilty look on Mia's face, but Gage's was only pleasantly surprised. Didn't anything faze this man?

“Dad!” said Mia and gave Gage a complicated look over her shoulder as she stepped forward and hugged her dad, “You came home early. I didn’t expect you until tonight.”

“Obviously,” he shot Gage and accusatory look.

“Oh dad please, it was only a kiss.” She shot a wide eyed glance to Gage who couldn’t help but grin. It was a hot, sexy, spur of the moment interlude that actually caught both of them by surprise.

Gage knew he was crazy about her before, but now she was like an addictive drug and he already wanted her again after that lustful act. Never had he gotten so excited from just seeing her after a few seconds and to take her against the wall in the hall when her father could have walked in at any moment was thoughtless. Yet, he didn’t care because after seeing her, he had to have her again and it consumed him.

Unfortunately he was picked for this job because of his impeccable self control, yet she’d managed to shatter it from the first moment he laid his hands on her in the police station. Finally he tore his eyes away from her remembering what he’d come there to do. “George, can I speak to you for a moment.” Gage said finally tearing his eyes from Mia.

“Sure thing.” He kissed Mia on the forehead, “Could you take my luggage upstairs?”

“I can.” She said picking up the bag and giving Gage a worried look before leaving.

George waited until his was sure she was out of earshot before he turned his angry gaze on Gage, “I don’t appreciate you pawing my daughter the minute I leave.”

Gage ignored him, “I want to take Mia to North Carolina next week.”

“Over my dead body!” George seethed.

“We need a more private place to talk,” Gage said calmly while he flicked a glance toward the stairway.

Mia still held her father's luggage in her hands as she waited out of view at the top of the stairs hoping to hear something. Then she heard the door shut to his study. What she wouldn't do to be a fly on the wall at that moment. However, she knew Gage's power of persuasion having experienced it herself the previous night. Blushing at the images that came flooding back to her she turned to go down to her father's room to put his luggage away.

"I'm going to give it to you straight George." He said after the man went straight to the scotch bottle and poured himself a drink.

"I never thought it would be any other way Gage." He lifted his glass, "drink?"

"I can't I've got to get back to work, but I'll certainly take a rain check."

"All right then," he took a gulp, "Tell me how you intend to convince me to let you take Mia across the country."

"My so-called grandfather's name is General Thaddeus Thomas." He quickly rushed forward to steady George as he dropped his glass, swayed slightly and paled several shades. "Here, sit down." He said with concern as he reached for a nearby chair and pulled it toward the man.

George accepted the chair that Gage helped him into. It took him a moment to overcome the initial shock, "Does she know?"

"No. He doesn't want me to tell her."

"Well, all of this makes sense now." He said almost to himself. "You here and after her like a bee to honey—"

"—That was not in the deal George." Gage interrupted, "The attraction is real."

This brought his head up to face Gage. The older man studied him for a bit, "Okay Gage, I can see you care about her, but my concerns still stand."

“Who better to protect her George? I take it from your early arrival that your food convention didn’t go well.”

“You and I both know that was no food convention.” He pressed the palm of his hand to his forehead, “Fuck.”

“Let me take her to North Carolina. I can protect her better there.”

“You’re sleeping with her aren’t you.” George didn’t phrase it as a question. “My only daughter.” He saw the kiss, and the way Mia looked at Gage. He knew something had happened between them.

“First of all, that’s really none of your business, and secondly, she’s not your daughter.” He said firmly, “If anyone has first rights to her it’s the General.”

“I know that.” George said in defeat. “But I raised her as my own.”

“He knows that. It’s why you still have her.”

Mia waited impatiently on the front lawn by his car twisting her hands together. It was a good half an hour when the screen door opened and closed she couldn’t help but rush toward him. The grin he was wearing made her smile back. “Well?”

“Start packing honey.”

“You’re kidding?” she said with complete astonishment.

“No, now come here and show me how much you appreciate me.”

She laughed and practically leapt on him as he lifted her up in the air and kissed her passionately, “Now I’ve got to get back to work, “ he set her down.

“What did you say to him?”

“We’ll talk later. I’ll call you tonight.” He bent his head down and kissed her again, “Later honey.” He gave her another sensual grin before he got in the car and drove away.

She watched the car disappear before she went back in

the house, "Dad?" she called and got no answer. So she went to the last place she knew he went and walked up to the door to his study, 'Dad?' she repeated to the closed door.

"Come in."

There was something in his tone that made him apprehensive, "Are you okay?" she opened the door and stepped in just to see him with a drink in his hand. Her eyes guided to his face he looked worried, "What happened?"

"Nothing Mia."

Her eyes narrowed, "You lie worse than mom." Did she actually see him flinch at the mention of her mother? "Did Gage upset you?"

"Absolutely not!" he defended, "Gage was a gentleman as usual."

"Oh." She looked doubtful. Especially after the way he defended him, because he was so over protective when he was around. Something happened between then and now to make him change his mind.

"I mean it Mia. He was full of promises to take good care of you and I believe him." He added seeing her sceptical expression.

"Really?" she sat in the chair next to him, "then why are you so upset?"

When he didn't say anything, she reached over and touched his hand.

He managed to force a smile, "Mia, just know that I love you more than life itself and if it hadn't been for you, your mother and I would have led very empty lives."

What brought that on?

He noticed her concern, "I don't mean to worry you honey, I just know I'm getting older and want you to know how much I appreciate you."

"Are you well?"

“Healthy as a horse.” He saw her become visibly relieved. “It’s just not often I say that.”

“so you’re okay with Gage taking me to North Carolina? What about the diner?” she watched his expression for anything suspicious and there was nothing when he spoke.

“I think its about time you got out and away from this small town, especially after what Liam did.”

“Oh-my-God, he told you.” She said incredulously.

“And Lisa.” He added with a narrow look, “She’s becoming too damn spoiled.”

Mia flattened her face in her hands.

“Honey.” Her father reached over and squeezed her shoulder, “I’m sorry I seem so apprehensive about Gage to begin with, but if I were to chose anyone for you to see, it would be him.”

“You really mean that?” she said softly seeing the honesty in his expression.

“yes, I do. In the beginning the age difference bothered me, but I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather have you dating at the moment. He’s got a good head on his shoulders.” He sighed heavily, “I know I’ve been working you to the bone for these past few months. I’ll talk to Joan and Al and see if they can work the extra shifts for that time because you really need this. You’ve been raised in this small town your whole life and you need a change. Not only that Gage said Jane would help out.”

Was she hearing him right? “How much have you had to drink?”

He held up his glass which was still three quarters full, “This was the only one and I only took one drink.”

“Something upset you Dad. Why don’t you want to talk about it?”

He forced another smile and shook his head, “I just miss your mother. Sometimes I get a little upset, and I’ve been able

to hide it from you until now." He gave her a sheepish smile, "You have enough on your plate." He patted her hand affectionately, "Now you have a chance at enjoying your life for however long this thing with Gage lasts, but he seems to genuinely care about you."

"I think so." She said with a subtle smile.

"And vice versa?" he asked.

"Oh yes!" she said without hesitation causing him to smile for the first time in the last two days.

Gage went back to the office that afternoon and as he walked in the door, the desk clerk Ellie, waved at him, "Gage Honey, you have a message." She gave him a piece of paper, which he read nodded his thanks and went through the door, by the desks and into his office to return the call. Unknown to him Ellie's eyes roved down to his nicely rounded backside. Then she rolled her eyes and fanned her face dramatically.

"Something that sinful should be shot." She said to herself.

Gage went into his office and shut the door to phone General Thomas.

"Is she coming?" came the familiar older voice on the other end of the phone.

"Yeah, it wasn't hard to convince him."

"Good. I want you here first before others start to arrive, so I can get to know her. Something I should have done years ago."

"I'll have my plane readied for Friday." Gage said.

"Have you told her anything about yourself?"

"No. Just what her father knows. I'll leave everything else up to you like you wanted."

"That will be fine. I'll see you Friday afternoon." He

hung up.

Gage followed suit. He stared at the phone for a moment wondering how this whole thing was going to go over with Mia and closed his eyes in thought. What if she felt betrayed? He had come to care for her more than he expected and losing her would quite possibly tear him in two. He never meant to make love to her, only protect her like he promised the General, but he also never expected to feel for her the way he did either. She was different than what he was used to. Hell, she was fantastic and he was crazy about her. Standing, he ran his hand through his hair in frustration. All of this was becoming too complicated. Then Teddy caught his eye as he walked through the squad room focusing his thoughts in another direction.

Still meaning to have a word with him over his daughter's behaviour he went out and followed the man to his office.

Teddy had gone with George on his trip to Arizona and he was just as solemn as George upon returning. Maybe because it wasn't Arizona they went to, and it wasn't a golfing slash food convention.

Gage wasn't sure if George had time to phone the Chief and tell him about his visit at noon, but he had a few things he wanted to talk to the man about besides that. He wrapped on the door jam and Teddy waved him in. Gage stepped in and shut the door, "I need to speak with you about Lisa."

"My daughter?"

"Yeah, when you and George left the day before last, Lisa had a party at your house and invited Mia."

"She did what?"

"Hang on, let me finish." Then he saw Liam enter the squad room and take a seat at his desk. He was sure his look turned deadly as he eyed the man, "I found Mia half blitzed in Lisa's room with Liam on top of her."

"What the fuck did you just say?" He shot to his feet, "You had better be lying to me Gage."

Gage didn't move he just sat there staring calmly at him, while sweeping his arm toward the room through the office window, "As you can see I didn't kill him. He's still alive." He paused, "For now."

"Are you saying my daughter had a hand in that?" He pointed an accusing finger at him, "And you better choose your words carefully."

"Yes I am." He held up his hand when he thought the man was going to burst an artery, "However, I don't think she expected Liam to take advantage of her. I think she was just trying to get her to loosen up a bit, and instead she ended up getting her drunk."

"Jesus Christ." Ted plopped down in his chair again. From the look on Gage's face, he wasn't lying, "I didn't know."

"Let me be honest with you Ted, I don't want Lisa around Mia anymore unless you do something about this."

"You can't possibly expect me to believe that this was all of Lisa's doing."

"No, but she influences Mia because she's popular and Mia's been vulnerable since her mother died three months ago. Lisa's taken full advantage of that."

"And you haven't." Ted accused. "You are no different."

"I genuinely care about Mia." He said in the same controlled voice, "You're daughter is out of control and you needed to know regardless of how pissed off at me you are, I know you're an honourable man and in time you'll see what I meant." He finally stood up, "Keep her away from Mia Ted, or I will."

"What the hell does that mean?" then he stopped, took a deep breath and waved a hand, "All right, let's assume that you're right, then I will handle this, but you keep out of it, until I

deal with it, and I will deal with it if I think she's done what you said."

"That's fair enough. You're a good man, I really don't want to cross you seeing that you're my chief, but I have a duty here that you don't know about, and Mia is my priority."

This brought Ted's brows up, "How about filling me in then. I take it this has something to do with the time off you asked for next week."

"I can't, but you can ask George what he knows because I have no control over him talking to you." He said with a speaking look before he left the room.

In about ten minutes Ted left the police station and Gage knew exactly where he was going.

"Gage I need to talk to you."

Gage knew Liam's voice before he even turned around to face the man. "I think you need to give me a few days Liam, because I still want to shoot you."

Liam looked past him to the others who were in the room hoping none of them could hear them, "Look, I can't apologize enough. Can we talk in your office?" He'd already been the brunt of a few of the men's anger when word had reached them of how stupid he'd been. Although they never frightened him like Gage did, it was embarrassing enough and the guilt was eating him alive.

"By all means—" he waved his arm ahead of him. His voice may have sounded calm but inside he was raging.

When they were inside he shut the door, "You'd better make it quick, because I'm not sure how much restraint I have in me from breaking your neck." He said with almost too much calm.

Liam didn't miss the deadly tone and held his hands up, "I know, I was a complete ass, but Gage, you need to know, I've been in love with Mia since she was sixteen."

"she didn't ask for your advances!"

"I know, but I had too much to drink and thought that maybe if I kissed her she would see how much I care. That's no excuse, but before I knew it I was on her—" he stopped when Gage took a menacing step toward him, " but I did stop." He defended causing the other man to pause.

"I know, she told me." he admitted reluctantly, "But that doesn't excuse your behaviour."

"She did?"

"She still defended you Liam, though you really didn't deserve it. From now on," his expression darkened, "if I so much as catch you looking at her with anything close to affection, I'll tear you in two."

"yeah Justin mentioned that." He said then paused studying him, and his expression became guilty again, "I need to know if she's alright. I didn't frighten her did I?"

"You did, but she's fine. Just remember what I said, because I swear to God I'll bust all of your fucking teeth out next time."

"I hear you." He held out his hand, "I hope we can stay friends."

Gage just stared at him flicking a brief glance to the man's outstretched hand.

"I swear on my father's grave it won't happen again." He added and that was when Gage's threatening stance finally relaxed somewhat and he reached out and shook the other man's hand.

"Agreed then." He allowed a subtle smile to grace his features, "You'd better love your father more than your own life Liam. If I find out he was an alcoholic wife beater, I'm coming after you."

"I swear." He smiled, "I did."

As Gage promised he called Mia later that evening.

"Gage?"

He chuckled, "Hi baby."

"Hi," she said and smiled into the phone.

"I wanted to come and see you tonight, but for some odd reason I'm really exhausted."

"Hmm," she said not missing his meaning, "I could sneak out of the house and meet you." She suggested huskily.

He near groaned. "Oh Christ honey, don't get me going. I really need some sleep, and if I have you in my bed that's the last thing I'll be doing, but I promise I'll pop by the diner and see you tomorrow." Truth is, he had a lot of planning to do for their trip. He'd already spoken with Jane and she was more than happy to help out George. Somehow she'd even swindled the keys of his jeep from him. At least their housekeeper was around if she needed anything and she did have the number of his mobile. He shouldn't worry about her, he raised her well to look after herself, but she was still only sixteen. Mia's sweet voice cut through his thoughts.

"Okay."

"I'll have you all to myself next week, remember that." He said deeply.

She laughed, "I'm giddy just thinking about it."

He chuckled, "Goodnight honey."

"Goodnight." She hung up and sighed looking at the phone. What was wrong with her? She couldn't go half a day without missing him terribly. Secretly hoping he felt the same way, she got up and went into her room to change into her pyjamas. Just then the phone rang again and she scooted back to it. "Gage?"

"It's Lisa."

It sounded as if she was crying, "What's wrong?"

"Mia, I didn't know about last night."

"What?"

"With Liam—I never thought he'd hurt you." She sniffed loudly, "Gage told Dad and he came home—" her voice cracked, "He came home early and caught Charlie and I—Oh God I feel like a tramp."

"I'm coming over."

"No—dad said I had to stay away from you."

"What?"

"I'm in so much trouble," she sobbed, "He took my car, kicked Charlie out and told me I was grounded for the rest of the summer. H—he threatened to charge Charlie with assault, Oh God—he'll never talk to me again!"

"Of course he will Lisa, he loves you." She defended, "I'm coming over. Meet me out back by the gazebo."

"I can't," she lowered her voice and hiccupped, "Dad's so mad. I've never seen him like this. I've been such a brat." She sobbed again, "Mia, just please forgive me okay?"

"There's nothing to forgive," she offered, feeling her own eyes water, "It wasn't that bad."

"Don't lie, I don't deserve it. When dad lets me see you again, I'll make this up to you okay?"

"I told you there's nothing to forgive." She repeated. "I still want to come over. It sounds like you need a friend."

"I have a good friend. Especially after last night because she still says she is." She paused, "I will call you when dad isn't so mad. Bye Mia."

"Bye Lisa." She hung up. Gage should have left this between them, not gotten Lisa in trouble. Although it did show her that he cared about her, she was upset for Lisa.

That night she hardly slept worrying about her friend and when her alarm went off the next morning she had trouble dragging herself out of bed to the shower. Her father left several hours ago to prep the diner for the morning, and she

really liked the walk to town. She chose a summery pale yellow halter top dress, locked the door and proceeded down the front steps when Gage's car drove up. Part of her wanted to leap for joy, but the other wanted to give him hell for interfering in her life. When he spoke in the husky deep voice she came to adore, the other won over and she gave him a stunning smile, but that didn't mean that she wasn't going to talk to him about Lisa.

He pulled in to the driveway and rolled down the window, "Get in honey, I'll give you a lift."

She got in the car and leaned over to give him a kiss.

"I should pick you up every morning after that delicious greeting."

"Maybe you should—Gage we've got to talk." It was hard concentrating on anything when he was around.

"Oh-oh, this is about Lisa." He said studying her expression, "I told you I was going to handle it."

She couldn't help but frown, "Okay, you did, but Lisa's upset."

"She should be."

"I disagree." She said with surprise at his harshness.

"Ah-the wildcat—"

"Wildcat?"

Putting the car into park, he shut off the engine and turned to her, "Honey, as if you didn't notice, our relationship has been moving fast, and I feel as though I've been blindsided. Never can I admit to feeling like this about a woman before. Now, I'm not used to this, " he waved an arm back and forth between them, "you and me—so I'm a little possessive. I can also step back and look at this situation between you and Lisa objectively. That woman is jealous of you and is doing her best to bring you down to her level so she doesn't feel so inferior."

"That's not true—Lisa's popular and beautiful—"

"Not as half as beautiful as you Mia." He said softly.

"What did you say?" her voice was barely a whisper of disbelief.

"I know you don't believe it yourself, but I mean it. It's the reason I asked you out to begin with. Besides the fact that you're as sweet as hell." His hand came up and caressed her jaw.

"Really?"

"Really." He gave her a sinful grin, "I knew from the first time I laid eyes on you, that I wanted you."

"I—find that so hard to believe."

"Mia, I don't really date women, I never really have, but then I saw you, and from that moment you affected me more than anyone. My life has been full of meaningless physical relationships and you're the first woman that has gotten under my skin. Your dad let you know some of what I did before I came here. Years of that life can harden a man and I didn't realize how much until I met you. So if I'm a little protective, you'll have to forgive me." His eyes searched hers and he couldn't help but feel a sense of relief when she nodded.

"Okay," she smiled, "I pretty sure that after that confession, I'm just about to fall at your feet."

"You too huh?" he leaned over, "Because I'm feeling pretty much the same way, now kiss me."

"Anytime." She said as she leaned toward him.

Although Mia left the house over an hour ago and she had a ride, she was still a half an hour late for work. Hopefully her father wouldn't see the blush that rose when she entered the diner over her guilt at what she had been doing. At least he remembered to remove his gun this time.

"Mia?" her father said as he came out from the back.

"hi Mia," came Al's voice.

She waved at him, "I slept in, sorry dad. Lisa phoned me last night upset, and I was worried about her so I didn't sleep well." Which was the truth.

"is she all right?"

"I don't know, she didn't want to see me."

"Well, Mia, this is probably for the best right now."

"What does that mean?" she said defensively. Why was everyone suddenly picking on Lisa? Mia knew perfectly what she was like but loved her anyway and that night wasn't all Lisa's fault. She didn't have to drink whatever she kept pouring in her cup, but she did and Gage knew that.

He nodded toward the window, "She does influence you even if you don't admit it, and Gage is right, you are too sweet for your own good." He certainly didn't want to tell her that her life was in danger.

She flushed, "Dad."

He smiled and kissed her forehead, "All right, no more embarrassment. Get to work, we open in five, and I'm sure the deputy chief will be here at lunchtime like he always is since he set his eyes on you."

"Thanks for not embarrassing me anymore," she laughed and walked into the back to get her apron.

Chapter Four

"A private plane!" she said in awe.

"It's a friends." He lied.

"Oh dear."

Gage pulled the jeep up to the plane, turned it off and got out. Jane who was sitting in the back seat chatting nonstop to the airport, hopped out and gave her brother a hug.

Mia thought it was really sweet. Then he bent his head and said something to her while giving her the keys. She blew him a kiss and got in the driver's side shooting Mia a thrilling look.

"I take it he doesn't give you the jeep too often."

"Are you kidding? It's his baby," she paused grinning, "that is, until you came along."

"Hush up." She said blushing causing Jane to laugh.

Mia was undoing her harness and was proud of herself that she finally learned how to do it just as another man came off the plane. She jumped out of the jeep as he shook Gage's hand and put his other hand on his shoulder with no less than genuine affection. He was tall like Gage but his head was shaved bald and she noticed as she neared him that he had that same look in his eyes that Gage did, but when he settled them on her, unlike Gage's, they didn't warm up at all. A shiver ran through her as she walked around the front of the vehicle and hesitated when the other looked at her.

"Mia!" he held out his hand and called over the hum of the engines. When she came around and took his offered hand, he introduced them, "this is John West. He's a very good friend and we go way back."

"Too far back!" the man laughed, "Nice to finally meet the woman who stole my best friend's heart."

Mia shot a gaze to Gage who just smiled. John may have been smiling, but it never reached his eyes.

"I'll get the luggage." John said nodding once to Mia and turning toward the jeep.

"Come on honey, it's quieter on the inside." He went to pull her up the steps but she resisted. "What is it?" He said turning ask to her.

"I've never been on a plane before." She said in awe staring at the craft, "Is it safe?"

He gave her a devilish grin, "Is my adrenaline junkie backing down?"

She snapped her eyes to his and slowly smiled, "Are you daring me."

"You bet your ass I am."

She circled her arm through his, "then let's go."

He laughed and led her up the steps and into the plane where there were another two men waiting. Gage introduced them as Bruce Schulz and Rene Dumais, "But Rene only speaks French."

"Oh." She said shooting a surprised look his way.

"Mademoiselle" he nodded and gave her a stunningly charming grin.

"Don't let his charm affect you Mia, he has women everywhere." Gage shot him a warning look which got a boisterous laugh and a long French one way conversation.

"What is he saying."

"Nothing." Gage said shooting him another glare.

"He's saying," interrupted John with a grin of his own as he came up behind them, "That he's never seen our sergeant so smitten."

"Shut the hell up John." Said Gage.

Mia turned her face up to his and despite the menacing tone of his voice, she could see the twinkle of amusement in his eyes.

"Sit down honey." He led her to the leather covered couch and pulled her down next to him. "do up your belt."

She reached down and snapped the ends together.

Rene said something again and Gage answered him in a terse tone.

"this is completely unfair Gage." She smiled at Rene then at him, "I don't speak French."

"It's a good thing, because the things I said shouldn't be said in English around a lady."

"I'd be willing to translate." John nodded, "But Gage has a point."

"I remember telling you to shut up John."

Bruce, Mia noticed never said a word and the man

looked more menacing than John, but when he looked at her she swore she could see a glint of approval in his eyes. Then it was followed by a slight nod. She gave him a smile before she shyly turned away and focused her attention back to Gage, "Did you serve in the war with these men?"

"Aye, he did Mia," said John. "We've been together for years because no one would put up with our sorry hides."

Mia saw Gage give him an arrogant smirk.

"Seriously though, we saw some pretty awful things, not worth repeating to you, but if we were to go through it again, I wouldn't want anyone else with me." He nodded toward Gage, "He saved my life."

Rene said something.

"Yeah Rene." He flicked a glance at him, "Rene says his too, and Bruce, well we were a little late before the Iraqis cut out his tongue—"

"—enough John!" Gage cut in as Mia gasped.

He glanced at her expression and apologized, "I'm sorry Mia, being around someone like you isn't common and I forget my manners."

"That's fine." She said feeling Gage's arm around her as the plane started taxiing down the runway. She started thinking that she should feel nervous but sitting there next to possibly the calmest man on the planet she actually relaxed.

Soon the rest of the men engaged in conversation, which Gage apologized for because it was mostly in French out of courtesy for Rene, but she wasn't the least bit offended being too tired from not sleeping much in the past few days. He must have noticed about an hour into the flight because he leaned back against the leather cushions and pulled her head into his shoulder as if it was as right as pie to do so. Regardless she was tired and didn't protest at the intimacy in front of his friends. Soon she was asleep.

"You weren't supposed to get involved Sergeant." Rene said in his native tongue.

"I know."

"This complicates things." Rene said.

"I know that too." He said in English.

"Can't say I blame you." John said casting a glance at Mia. *"But, the General is not going to be happy that you defiled his granddaughter."*

Gage shrugged, seeming unconcerned, but inside he couldn't help but feel incredibly guilty over his actions. Never had he compromised a mission before in his life, but Mia went beyond that and despite his outward indifference, he wasn't letting her go no matter what the General said.

Several hours later Mia was nudged awake by Gage and much to her surprise the plane had already landed, "come on honey, the car is waiting."

"The car?" she stood stunned looking at the charcoal grey limousine when he led her off the plane.

"Yeah, the General is full of class." He led her to the vehicle as the other three men followed them.

Thaddeus paced back and forth in front of his southern style mansion anxiously waiting to see Mia after eighteen years of separation.

When the car came into view he wanted to rush down the driveway and meet them but he wasn't a man who released his emotions often, and despite his inner conflict to do so, decided to remain calm. That is until he saw how beautiful she was. Gage was right, the photo he had didn't do her justice. He came down off the veranda to greet her.

"Mia, this is Thaddeus." Gage introduced them with a glint of pride.

"Your Gage's grandfather?" Mia didn't see the similarities

so she thought maybe he took more after his mother's side.

"Sometimes." He said with a smile causing her to look confused, "Extraordinary." He said as he kissed her hand causing her to blush.

"I think we need to talk." Said Thaddeus looking over her head to Gage.

"Let me get Mia settled and the men and I will join you." Gage answered.

"Of course." He settled his eyes back on her again with obvious warmth. "Until later dear." He smiled.

"Nice meeting you." She said as Gage took her hand and led her into the house.

"Out of respect for the General, we're not sleeping in the same room Mia. He's old fashioned, but our rooms have an adjoining door, so expect me in yours during the night and every night that we're here." He said in a tone that told her she had no choice in the matter followed by a look over his shoulder at her.

"Sure thing Sergeant." She teased causing him to laugh. She wouldn't have it any other way. She had been wanting to get him alone since they left Scott Springs together.

"Are you sure you're only eighteen?" He said seriously as he turned and looked down at her, "Because you act twice your age."

"Positive." She beamed at the compliment.

"Although," he added lowering his voice so only she could hear him, "Your youthful energy contradicts it." He gave her a devilish grin.

"Shhh." She shot a look around them and was relieved that they were alone.

"I think it's a little obvious that we've been together, especially when I can't keep my hands off you for five minutes." He squeezed her hand to make his point because he'd had a hold of it since they'd gotten out of the car.

"I know what you mean." She said softly because she felt exactly the same way.

"Good." He said and led her up the stairs and down the hall to her room. Opening the door he allowed her to step through first.

"Wow." She looked around, "This is incredible."

"The General likes to keep things original. Especially the southern style."

"My goodness, everything is so beautiful." She walked over to the double doors and opened them to the balcony. "What an incredible view." She said as she bent her head back to look at the night sky. "The stars seem so clear, like that night you and I watched the meteor shower."

"It is." He answered and came up behind her to circle his arms around her. Leaning down he kissed her neck and she tilted her head aside for him, "I spent a few years here and the view still has me in awe," he released her and turned her around, "Among other things." His bent his head and brushed his mouth across hers. "I need to go and talk to Thad about his birthday arrangements. Are you tired?"

"Very. I'm not used to plane trips. I've heard about jet leg, but now I know what it feels like even though I slept all the way here." She smiled up at him when he lifted his head to stare down at her.

"Then get ready for bed, " a sensual grin crossed his face, "I'll join you later. So hopefully you don't sleep too sound."

"For you, I'll keep an eye open." She said with a ravishing smile.

"Good." He brushed his mouth across hers before leaving.

Thaddeus, Rene, Bruce and John were all waiting for him in the library. He knew the look on the General's face before he said anything.

"They let him off with good behavior."

"I know, George told me." Gage said, folding his hands behind his back and standing rigid with his feet apart. Some habits of his past were hard to break and he was in a room with his superior so he took the military stance as did the other three men.

"I had a man follow him for a few days but he lost him," he began pacing, "He's well trained Gage," he paused looking at him, "maybe not as good as you, but definitely a close second."

"We'll protect her General," Gage added, "I won't let anyone harm her. I'll keep her with me at all times."

"I shouldn't have this party." He said exasperated running his hand through his hair, "Dorothy wanted it because it's my sixty-eighth, but she doesn't know about Mia, or anything else. I have a bad feeling that he'll try something then."

Gage stared at him, "You'll have to tell Dorothy the truth and Mia too then." He turned to Bruce, "You'll take first watch," then he nodded to Rene, "you're second." Both men nodded without hesitation.

"Ah hell!" he said angrily starting to pace again.

"General, " Said John, "you know us, we won't let anyone near her that we don't know."

"On my life," Added Gage.

"Ours too." Said John, "It's the least we could do since you saved our hides in Afghanistan."

Thaddeus nodded, "I can't thank you enough."

Mia wasn't sure what time it was when she felt the large warm hard, naked body slide next to hers, but she really didn't care. Especially when he started doing those amazing things with his hands on her body. The man had an uncanny sense of where all of her triggers to sexual desire lay. Yet when she began a little exploration of her own it was followed by a hoarse masculine growl and it didn't escape her that she was learning

his and because of it they didn't get to sleep until the early hours of the morning completely exhausted and satiated.

Mia awoke to the bright light of the sun shining in through the balcony doors. By the looks of it, it was noon or after then. How embarrassing. She had slept through the whole morning. Rolling over stretching out her arm she felt an empty pillow and lifted her head to see that Gage must've left some time ago because that spot wasn't even warm. Didn't that man sleep? He'd hardly rested since they got here, and she'd done nothing but sleep. Feeling guilty she dragged her sore body out of bed she made her way to the shower and groaned. There were muscles hurting that she didn't even know she had. How could a man manage to discover them all on a woman? Smiling, she turned on the shower and stepped under the spray. The man was a machine and she was definitely in love with him. She knew now that she would have never let him make love to her if she wasn't. Part of her really wanted to confess this to him, but the other half thought that if she did he would run from her. So for the time being she would keep it to herself, until he gave her some indication of how he felt too. For the past year and since her mother's death, she had developed a sense to keep her feelings to herself. It was for her own protection and her father knew this so he didn't probe her that much. No only that she knew he was dealing with his own grief and he didn't need more of a burden. Somehow that characteristic of hers spilled over to Gage. She was afraid to tell him how she felt because it would leave her vulnerable.

After she finished washing her hair and reflecting on her decision, she rinsed off and got out of the shower. She couldn't help wonder where Gage went and when he left. Wrapping a towel around herself she walked out and pulled out a summery cream eyelet dress and put it on. Then she sat at the vanity and pulled her hair off her face plaiting it in a braid that ran all the

way down her back.

Thaddeus was waiting for her in the large foyer when she descended the stairs. Pausing she looked around.

"He's not here Mia."

She brought her eyes to his and couldn't miss the smile that he wore over knowing who she was looking for.

"I sent him and the men on an errand." He held out his hand, "Why don't you join me for a bit. I'd like to talk to you." He held his breath at the smile that she gave him. No wonder Gage couldn't help himself. However it stirred memories that were painful. Despite this he managed to keep it off his expression. Even when she descended the stairs and took his hand Mia reminded him of her mother. "I hope you slept well." He said as he turned and led her into the library where he met Gage and his men the night before.

Mia was grateful that he turned away so he couldn't see the rising blush. "I did, thank you."

"You must indulge an old man Mia." He said as he guided his hand toward one of two Victorian backed chairs that faced each other, "I just want to show you something."

"Okay." She said taking the seat as he walked over to one of the shelves and removed what looked like a photo album.

"My daughter," he paused, "Died just over seventeen years ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she said sincerely bringing her hand to her chest feeling his pain.

"I understand that you just lost your mother, so I can relate—in a way." He made his way back over to the other chair and set the album on his lap. "I kept her memory alive in this album. I'd like for you to see it." He lifted it up and held it for her

"Okay." She smiled and took it from, set it on her lap and opened it. The pictures were obviously in chronological order

with the first being a beautiful black and white picture of a baby girl with dark hair and vibrant blue eyes.

"My wife still grieves for the loss after all of these years. It's her wish that I have this birthday party. I'm not big on celebrations, but you must understand that with Dorothy there are a lot of what ifs. Like what if Glenda was alive today? Would we have grandchildren? What would they look like? That sort of thing." He said watching her expression.

She flipped over another page and saw the little girl in what looked like a school uniform and she was possibly five or six, "Oh she's so pretty."

"yes she was." He smiled

Mia lifted her eyes to his, "I'm sorry for your loss General."

"I know you understand." He gave her a reassuring smile, "Just having you here makes everything feel as if it never happened."

That endearment pulled at her heart strings. Mia could tell that it was painful for him to talk about it. "Can I ask how she died? Was she ill?"

The smile on his face faltered and he shook his head, "She was murdered."

Mia gasped.

"I don't mean to shock you, but it's important to me that you know the truth." He watched her expression carefully hoping not to upset her too much. When she was able to slowly nod he continued, "She was twenty-five when she died. Unfortunately she married a man who was under my command and in the beginning they were happy. At least I thought they were." He stood up and walked to one of the large windows that looked out into the back of the house, "then we went to war. We saw some pretty horrific things and Danny lost half the troops under his command. Something in him snapped. I don't

know if it was always there or it happened from seeing so many of us die."

"Desert Storm?" she asked, "I didn't think there were many people lost in that war."

"There were. More than our government admits." He turned and walked back toward her.

"My Dad says he saw some terrible things too."

"Ah, yes, George."

"You know my father?" she said with surprise.

"He was in my command also. He and Danny were best friends."

"He never mentioned that, or you." she said with surprise. Then again her father didn't like to talk about the things he had seen.

"There's reasons for that." He said taking his seat again and nodded toward the album, "We'll get to that. Turn the page Mia."

Her breath caught in her throat as she eyed the next photograph, "How did you get this picture? Did my father send it to you?"

"No, that is my daughter, Glenda."

She looked at him with puzzlement, and stabbed a finger at the photograph, "This is me."

"No honey, that is your mother."

When Gage entered the house with his men several minutes later he heard the General's voice. He and his men had been scouting out the surroundings for the last few hours to familiarize themselves with the territory. Thaddeus' mansion was situated on several hundred acres.

"Gage!"

Years of being finely attuned to spring into action had him in the room within seconds at the panicked sound of the

older man's voice. Mia was sprawled in a chair next to Thaddeus who was patting her hand affectionately.

"she fainted."

"Hell." He said and strode quickly up to her, bent down and scooped her up in his arms, "I'll take her back to her room."

"I didn't expect her to react so strongly."

"You said yourself General, that she'd been sheltered her whole life."

"Yes I did." He said guiltily. "Put her to bed. I'll leave the rest to you, I feel as though I damaged her in some way."

"You were right when you said she needs to know too." Gage said reassuringly, "She'll get through this." He left the room with Mia in his arms.

As he was laying her down on the large bed she came to.

"Gage?" she said softly.

"Yeah, you fainted and scared the General half to death." He mused as he poured her a glass of water. "Do you want a drink?" her soft blue eyes focused on his, "He told me I was his granddaughter."

"You are." He said holding the glass for her to take a drink.

She shook her head, "But you said you—" her eyes went wide.

"I might have spoke out of turn, he's not my grandfather, but he is my General. I was caught behind enemy lines and General Thomas got my team out when the army was going to leave us to die. Since then I help him out when he needs it." He sighed and looked away from her for a moment while he set the glass of water on the bedside table, "I wasn't suppose to get involved with you Mia," he returned his gaze to hers, "I was sent to Scott Springs to protect you."

"Oh God." She said as the realization hit her, "He sent you to get me?"

"No, he sent me to protect you." Gage corrected seeing the emotions playing over her lovely face as she was beginning to figure things out.

"I was a job!" she blurted out clearly hurt.

He winced, "It started out that way."

"You lied to me." She said as her eyes watered up.

"No, not really. I just never told you the whole truth."

"You—and I—we—" she released a sob unable to finish. She gave herself to this man heart and soul and he just let her know that she was an assignment.

His chest tightened at her pain. He screwed up he knew he did, but things had changed over the past few weeks with her and he needed to let her know that, "Mia, let me explain."

"Gage, you should have explained this a few weeks ago," she sobbed, "before I fell in love with you!"

"You did?" He said softly.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she nodded.

He smiled and wiped the them away with his thumbs, "Honey, I'm entirely flattered." He bent down and kissed her stunned face before pulling back and staring at her, "I feel like the luckiest man alive."

Mia couldn't believe that he was taking it all so calmly. She was devastated, "Everything was a lie."

"I didn't lie to you. Everything I told you was the truth. I was under orders and couldn't reveal the real reason I was with you, but that went out the window the first moment I laid eyes on you. I got involved with you on my own. In fact the General threatened to kill me over it, but I was already smitten."

"What?" she said in disbelief.

"If you'll still have me Mia, I'll stay in Scott Springs."

"You would?"

"For you I would." He said thickly. "Because I love you too."

This time she really did cry and flung her arms around his neck holding on tightly. She felt his arms circle around and embrace her.

"Honey you have to stop crying, it's breaking my heart to see you this way." He pushed her head into the arch of his neck and turned his head to kiss her cheek, "Stop."

She nodded and released another sob. "Where do we go from here?" she managed to say.

"Well, I was thinking that we get married, have a dozen kids or so when you're ready."

She pulled back from him, "Married?"

He gave her an adoring smile, "You don't think I'll leave you for some other man to snatch up do you?" then his expression darkened, "I wanted to kill Liam for touching you."

"Liam isn't what I want." She said feeling some of her humor returning, "But then again there's your harem to consider. All of those broken hearts."

He chuckled, "Now that's the Mia I know." He grinned, "As for my proposal, I was waiting for your grandfather's birthday celebration, but I suppose this is just as well. We'll announce it officially then. If that's all right with you and of course you'll say yes."

"Gage you're my life, of course I'll say yes." She beamed up at him, "I'm just so overwhelmed."

He gave her a hard passionate kiss, then he lifted his head and stared down at her, "Now, about the rest of what your grandfather was trying to tell you."

"Gage, I'm not sure if I can deal with this."

"You need to hear this all now, because your life is in danger honey, and I need you to listen to me until I get this guy."

"What guy? What do you mean my life is in danger?"

Gage took a deep breath, "Did Thad tell you about your mother."

"Yes."

"And who she married."

"A man named Danny."

"Danny is your father."

"No—that's not possible—I—"

"George and Marie took you after your mother died. They raised you as their own Mia, but your father's name is Danny Vanderburg."

She shook her head.

"Danny murdered your mother after he returned from desert storm. George was his best friend and with the General's help took you and hid you. They changed their last names and moved to Scott Springs."

"I don't believe you." She said getting out of bed and moving away from him, "George is my father, Marie is my mother, she died three months ago." She said, but somehow she didn't believe her own words. Things that Thaddeus told her earlier and what Gage was telling her now, started to sink in.

Gage stood up and started moving toward her but she held up her hands to stop him. "Mia, Thad, George and Marie did this to protect you. Danny swore he'd kill you to."

"What?" she said with astonishment, "You said I was his daughter."

"He seems to think that once he gets rid of you he'll be free of the nightmares he got while he served overseas. But that isn't going to happen because something is wrong with him and probably always was. That's why he killed Glenda, your mother." He took a deep breath, "That convention that George and Ted went to last week wasn't a convention in Arizona, it was a parole hearing in Seattle."

"Oh God—" she suddenly felt faint again and Gage was beside her guiding her back to the bed. After he sat her down, he sat beside her and took her hands in his. "That's where you

went wasn't it?"

"Yes." He admitted, "I was meeting the General because we had some things to discuss if the man got out and he did. I came back before the parole hearing, but your father—George, told me it didn't go well."

"That's why he was upset that day he found us together in the hall."

"Yes. It didn't have much to do with me having my hands on you. It mostly had to do with Danny getting parole."

She raised her eyes to his, "That's why he agreed that I could come with you."

"Yes, he was very worried about you and knows that I'm your best form of protection. I told him that I knew the General."

"You still should have told me." She said accusingly.

"Mia, one thing I've come to know, is that sweet disposition of yours. Do you honestly think that you wouldn't be worrying every second of your life whether this man was going to come after you, or where he would strike?"

"I suppose." She said guiding her eyes back to his, "I feel as if everyone has lied to me Gage."

"We did it to protect you." He explained, "Don't be angry with George. As far as we're all concerned he raised you, gave you love, and loved you like he would his own child. He is your father in every way but blood."

"I understand that—I really do, but it'll take time for me to get over the fact that my whole life has been hidden from me."

"That's understandable Mia. I can't imagine how shocking this is to you, but you need to realize that everyone involved did it because they love you, including me."

She could feel her eyes sting with tears again and searched his gaze, "I believe you Gage."

"As for your protection, it's now my job and now I'm making it my life." He smiled, "But you need to listen to me. Is that clear?"

"Crystal." She said softly turning her head away, "I'm having a hard time believing that my father is going to kill me."

"Might try to," Gage added, "I won't let him near you."

"He might actually be reformed Gage."

"From what the General told me, I doubt it."

"What did he tell you?"

"Those are gory details about your mother's death and I think you've heard enough tonight, don't you?"

"I do." She nodded still reeling from what he told her. She didn't want to know how she was killed—ever. From the look on Gage's face it was bad.

"Are you going to be okay honey? We don't need to go down to dinner. I could have it brought up to your room."

"That wouldn't be fair to the Gen—my grandfather," she faltered to find the right words, "I must have upset him by fainting and now that I know who he is, I think I need to get to know him."

"See baby, your tougher than you think." He leaned down and kissed her. "Go wash up and I'll meet you downstairs. You're face is red and swollen."

She nodded and allowed him to pull her to her feet. He bent down and kissed her again before he left her alone.

Thaddeus was waiting at the bottom of the stairs when Gage came into view, he was too anxious to wait for him to start talking, "Is she all right?"

"Yeah, she is now. She's coming down for dinner." He came down the stairs and placed a hand on his shoulder, "She's not upset with you General, but she is rather set back about the whole thing, so take it easy with her."

"I understand. I spoke with Dorothy." He winced.

Gage smiled, "How angry is she?"

"Furious that she had no idea that her granddaughter was still alive. As far as she knew, she was murdered with her mother and to find out that the grave she's been visiting all these years is empty didn't go over very well."

"I suppose it didn't."

"I knew if we told her the truth she would demand to see her. She's angry with me that she missed out on her life."

"Dorothy will get over it Thad."

"Yes, but not for a while." His eyes guided past him to the woman who appeared at the top of the stairs.

Gage turned and held out his hand when he saw Mia come down toward him. He felt relief that she still took his hand even though he felt assured that she had forgiven him.

"Gage told me everything." She said softly while staring at the older man in a new light.

"Are you feeling better?"

She nodded, "I'll be fine. This whole thing is just such a shock."

"You took it a lot better than your grandmother," he said a little sheepishly, "If you don't mind, I'd like to introduce you to her before she divorces me."

This actually caused Mia to laugh, "She didn't know?"

"No, we were protecting you and I know there was no way in hell she'd let you go if she knew you were alive. I'll probably spend the rest of my days making this up to her." He said wincing.

Mia felt sorry for him. It must've been really hard to let his daughter's daughter go and not have any contact with her over the years. She let go of Gage's hand and went to Thaddeus to embrace him. He accepted her affection without the slightest hesitation and Mia was sure she heard him muffle a sob in her neck.

Her grandmother was no different and didn't hesitate when she was introduced to give her a hug. She had white short hair and was surprisingly slender and not dressed like she always thought a grandmother should be. She was wearing designer jeans and a fashionable blouse, and despite her age, Mia thought she looked youthful and very pretty. She was expecting a southern sophisticated woman with a large hat and although she possessed the southern drawl, she was very down to earth. It was also obvious where Mia got her blue eyes from. George's were brown and Marie's were more hazel but Dorothy's were a vibrant blue set off by her white hair. George had always told her that she'd gotten them from her mother's mother and obviously that was the truth, even though she thought Marie was her mother and her mother was long since deceased.

Over the next few hours she visited with the both of them and if it was possible fell in love with her grandparents. Her father and mother had told her that their grandparents were dead on both sides, so to discover that she had a family that was as wonderful as these two overruled her previous feelings of betrayal.

Gage had left with the men shortly after dinner and she already missed him. She had to admit that her heart swelled whenever she thought of his proposal, but there was no more mention of it over dinner and afterwards before he left. She began to wonder if he had just said that to calm her down because she was so upset.

That night, he still hadn't returned and she retired to her room after saying her goodnights to Thad and Dorothy. Unfortunately it left her time to wonder if Gage was serious about what he'd said earlier and recalled that over dinner he hardly even glanced at her, but mostly spoke to his men. Granted her grandmother talked her ear off, asking her all about herself, but could it be possible that Gage had changed his mind.

Somehow she couldn't help wonder if it was the only way he could soothe her at the time because she was so upset.

She changed into a pale blue satin nightgown and brushed out her long hair thinking about it. Maybe he was preoccupied with the party tomorrow. After all he'd told her he was going to protect her. As it was, the place was a hubbub of activity when she came down to supper as supplies started to arrive for the next day. More than once Dorothy had to get up and direct her staff. Once again there was no sign of Gage and she had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Thank goodness for her grandmother who filled her day with family history, photo albums and a tour of the estate.

Mia smiled thinking of her grandmother. She liked her from the beginning and she had promised to take her shopping for a gown the next day even though the place would be busy with the setup for Thad's birthday party. Mia had actually brought several dresses but Dorothy waved a dismissive hand and told her that this was a gift, and when you're in the south, you must dress for a party. Mia smiled at her reflection actually looking forward to the shopping trip. She was eager to see what 'dressing for a party' was like.

Meanwhile, Thad was downstairs in his study with Gage as he was opening his safe. "is the surveillance all set?" he said without turning around.

"Yes sir." Said Gage watching the man take something out of the safe before closing the door and sliding the hidden panel back. He and his men had spent the afternoon and well into the evening setting up high tech video and audio devices around Thaddeus' property. Gage wasn't taking any chances on Danny getting near Mia and he had every intention on staying close to her tomorrow while his men were stationed out of sight. Unfortunately he didn't get much sleep the night before because of it, and really didn't want to disturb Mia in the middle of the

night knowing that she was also exhausted from the days activities. He also knew that he couldn't keep his hands off of her and would exhaust her even further if he'd slept with her, but he did check on her before he retired to his own room. She was beautiful, sleeping peacefully in that large bed alone and it took a hell of a lot of willpower not to strip down and crawl into bed with her.

"here." Said Thad handing something to Gage.

"What is this?"

"It's Glenda's engagement ring. It was handed down through generations on my side of the family."

Gage opened the velvet box to see and incredible midnight sapphire surrounded by a cluster of diamonds, "This is stunning." There was no doubt the ring itself was priceless, just like his Mia.

"You can give it to Mia, when you propose tomorrow." Thad said eyeing up the younger man, then smirking when he saw the rare look of surprise on his face. "What? Do you think an old man like me is blind?"

Gage actually grinned, "No sir."

"You told me you were falling in love with her Gage, now do right by her."

"I will." He said closing the box and slipping it into the pocket of his jeans.

Then the General's expression turned grave, "Protect her Gage. It'll kill Dorothy and I to lose her again."

"On my life." He said without hesitation and he meant it.

Mia was dreaming about her mother when she felt strong hands slide up her hips and a voice in the distance.

"Wake up honey."

She opened her eyes to see Gage hovering over her with his arms on either side of her head, "Hi." She murmured sleepily.

"Hi yourself," he smiled bending down and kissing her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, but he pulled up.

"Just a minute." He said sitting back on his heels, "Sit up." he took her hands and pulled her to a sitting position.

"What is it?" He didn't look worried, but she still couldn't help but wonder if he'd changed his mind and was going to tell her now. She couldn't shake the apprehension of not seeing him today or the night before. What he did next completely erased all of that.

He reached over to the bedside table and picked something up. Mia's eyes widened when she noticed what it was.

The ring was nothing like she'd ever seen. Even in the scant light of the moon that shone through the glass of the double doors to the balcony, she could still see how beautiful it was. She opened her mouth to say something but had lost her voice as he took her hand and slid it on her finger. Then he lifted it to his mouth and placed a tender kiss in the same area while his eyes remained on hers .

"Now, it's official Mia, you are and always will be mine." He said thickly as he threaded his fingers in her long hair and brought her mouth to his.

"Are you sure?" she managed to choke out against his mouth as tears poured down her cheeks.

"As I live and breathe," he added while flattening her out on the mattress and coming down on top of her. "I've missed you today." He meant every word. He couldn't get enough of her and when he was away from her, his thoughts were obsessed with her. He loved her, there was no doubt, but did that cause a weakness in his need to protect her. Rene had blasted him over that several times that day, but he wasn't going to let her go. Rene would understand if it was happening to him. Whatever thoughts he was having were suddenly cut off when

she slid under him and down the mattress. His knees were on either side of her thighs and she took advantage of that to work her way down his body. "Mia what—oh Christ!" he sure as hell never taught her that! His hands reached out and grabbed the headboard so he didn't fall flat on his face in her pillow as she took him in her warm mouth. It was obvious she'd never done that before because of the hesitation she showed, but before long she had the hang of it and if Gage had a thought in his head before, it was blank now. He actually bit his own arm to keep from yelling as that soft silky mouth moved over him. He could feel his legs tremble to keep him from falling down. Her hands curved over his bottom as she became more self assured in the act. He may have sunk his teeth into his arm to keep from hollering but that didn't stop the deep throaty groans from leaving him. As he felt the rising pressure deep in his pelvis he reached down and twisted his fingers in her hair, "—Mia—" he choked out meaning to pull her off of him before he climaxed, but somehow he lost the strength and instead became consumed in the pleasure she was giving him as he started to move his hips in time with the stroke of her mouth. With the sweet sounds of her own soft moans vibrating through his cock and those sucking noises he actually thought he had died when he finally came. As he buried his face in her pillow to muffle a loud throaty groan, he swore he exploded into a million pieces. It went on endlessly as he climaxed and shards of excruciating pleasure rocketed through him over and over again.

Mia moved out from under him as he collapsed on his stomach. She sat up and looked down the length of his backside thinking that he was a magnificent specimen of a man. She reached up and brushed her long hair back over her shoulders and found herself grinning as she looked down at the satiated man who was still moaning. Of course she never did anything like that before in her life, but she really didn't expect him to

react so strongly to it and it just encouraged her. She leaned forward reaching out to run her hands up the back of his muscled thighs which caused him to moan again but not move. She laughed softly and brought her body down on top of his back while kissing his cheek. If he had the slightest idea that it was Lisa's constant lewd talk that led to her curiosity, he would probably forgive her in a heartbeat. "I think I've worn out the machine." She murmured in his ear.

He didn't even open his eyes, "Worn out? You've killed it." He mumbled right before he fell asleep.

Mia smiled down at him feeling proud of what she was able to do especially since it was the first time she ever tried anything like that. She kissed him once more before she adjusted herself along his back and drifted off to sleep soon after. Gage didn't even rouse with it and had fallen into one of the deepest sleeps he'd had in years.

When Mia awoke the next morning, it was too a soft caress of a finger along her mouth. She blinked several times to see Gage propped up on an elbow with a devious grin on his face. "what?" she smiled.

"I'm just thinking how wicked that pouty mouth of yours was last night."

Mia must have blushed a hundred shades of red as her actions came flooding back to her. How come things were so different in the night than the light of day?

"Now, I've got to know, where did you learn that because I know for a fact that you've only been with me?" He lifted his brows curiously.

"Gage please, you're embarrassing me." She flushed silently thanking Lisa for her descriptive exploits.

"Honey, trust me, you definitely shouldn't be embarrassed about that, what a talent." He said rolling his eyes.

"Stop it." She said ready to pull the blankets up and cover

her face.

He focused his eyes on her again, but his smile was still there, "I'll tell you what." He said sliding his hand down her abdomen then into her causing her to pinch her eyes shut, gasp, and arch off the bed, "If you are embarrassed about such a thing, let me show you what I can do. Then maybe you would see that such an act of love is not shameful." He began a slow torturous tease of his fingers and she responded as she always did to his touch.

Mia didn't hear anything passed 'let me show you what I can do'. When his mouth covered her as his fingers continued to tease in the same area, she threw her head back, moaned and wrapped her thighs around his head and twisted her hands in his hair.

Gage watched her gorgeous body arch off the bed as he teased her with his tongue. He was going to introduce her to oral sex slowly but she'd taken it upon herself to initiate it and he couldn't be more pleased. It just proved to him that they were compatible, not that he had any doubt.

When her moans indicated to him that she was close he lifted himself back on his knees and reached down to flip her on her side bringing her bottom against him. He saw the look of desire on her expression and knew that she hadn't even noticed what he was doing. If he didn't have experience, he wouldn't have been able to form a thought, but he was in control this time and he would show her that there were many ways to make love. Reaching down he lifted one of her long legs up to his shoulder and used his other hand to guide himself into her. It was then her eyes shot open and centered on him, but it didn't last when he started moving in her. Her head arched back, her mouth parted and she started to moan all over again. Soon he too was groaning but he was still in control even though he was consumed by how tight, hot and wet she was.

When he felt himself nearing his climax he flipped her leg down, and came down on top of her. She was starting to sob from her own release, but he needed a few more strokes and that's all it took for him to come deep inside her.

Mia had come to love the groans of satisfaction he would emit when he climaxed as he muffled it into her neck before he fell limply on top of her.

Though she could hardly breathe with his heavily muscled body firmly on top of hers, she loved it. Her hands threaded through his hair combing through the thick locks knowing that she loved him more than her own life. More than anything in the entire world. After a moment she felt tears fall from her eyes. Could anything have been more precious to her than being with him? He must have felt the wetness fall onto his face because he lifted his head and looked at her.

"shush baby, you know you kill me when you cry." He said kissing her tenderly.

"It was just so beautiful." She managed.

"Yes, it was." He said searching her moist gaze.

"I'm so afraid of losing you." She confessed.

"Nothing will happen." He reassured kissing the wet streaks on her cheeks.

"Gage I'll die if something happens to you."

"Don't talk nonsense." He said softly, "Besides, I didn't use protection this time. You had me so worked up I forgot completely. You could be pregnant. Now the mother of my child does not talk about such things." He added with a genuine smile.

"A baby?" her eyes widened.

"I'll apologize if you want me too, but it's a little late." He became serious, "I know you're young Mia, maybe too young to be a mother but—"

"Oh God, no don't say that." She said cupping his face in her

hands, "I would never frown upon having your child even if I'm eighteen."

Gage had an image of her holding a little girl, his little girl and he suddenly had a wash of emotion go through him the likes he never fathomed. Mia had breached that forsaken barrier and had captured his heart. Without a word he started moving his hips against hers, moving himself within her again, and bent his head to take her mouth while made love to her slowly, more tenderly this time.

Chapter Five

When Mia had woken up the second time that morning Gage was gone. She smiled and rolled over to inhale his scent in his pillow. Then she looked at the clock thankful that it was still early. She had promised her grandmother to let her take her shopping so with effort trying to ignore her screaming aching body from Gage's lustful appetite, she dragged herself out of bed and headed to the shower.

After she finished getting dressed and pulling her hair back off her shoulders she took some time to phone Lisa. She knew that her friend said to wait, but she wanted to tell her the good news and see how she was doing. To her surprise it sounded as if her spirits had lifted considerably since she last spoke to her and she chatted endlessly at the sound of Mia's voice. It turned out that her father and her had a long talk and Charlie was allowed back in her life, but only as far as the driveway. Mia grinned. Again she apologized for what had happened and according to Charlie, Liam was beyond guilt ridden.

"It's okay Lisa, he wasn't himself. I think he was foolishly drinking like me." Mia assured her.

"I told him that you wouldn't hold it against him Mia, because that's the type of person you are." She said sincerely, "I

need to forgive myself for what I've done to you too, so I know how he feels."

"Lisa—"

"No, it's okay. I deserved it. I did act like a spoiled brat. And I'm happy for you and Gage. However," she paused with a chuckle, "You will have to fill me in on every juicy detail about that stud."

Mia laughed expecting that, "It's still not happening."

"I'll weasel it out of you when we go shopping for bridal gowns."

"Oh gosh, it just sounds so surreal." Mia said.

"I can't wait to see you. Dad says I can when you come back, then we'll plan your wedding." She said excitedly.

"I can't wait either." Mia said before they said their goodbyes. She'd have to tell Gage that Lisa sounded reformed, and she sure hoped he would approve of her having her friend around again.

If she thought her and her grandmother would be alone during their shopping trip, she was wrong. Gage had sent John with them. She hadn't told Gage that he frightened her, but she was sure that Gage trusted this man for a reason. He would have come but he was still taking care of the security with her grandfather.

Oddly enough, he seemed uncomfortable in the boutiques that they went into but still kept close to them. She actually felt sorry for him especially when Dorothy insisted on his opinion with everything she tried on. If Mia was blushing, she was certain John was even more uncomfortable despite his outward appearance. However, when she asked what he thought of the dresses his eyes would glance off her before he gave an approving nod. Dorothy seemed completely undeterred from his reluctant reactions.

It was refreshing to her because then she knew that he

wasn't as coldhearted as she originally thought and Dorothy had told her that she'd known him for five years and she seemed to like him.

It was the last boutique that they visited where Mia found the gown of her dreams. It was a velvet satin number that was royal blue in color. Dorothy clapped her hands when she emerged from the change room.

"It's lovely! Absolutely lovely! And it's the exact color of your eyes. Isn't it John?" She said to the tall man beside her who, like he did in every other store, was scanning the surroundings with practiced eyes.

He settled his gaze on her and smiled this time, "Gage is a lucky man."

Mia near fell over at that statement. Especially when she saw the glint of approval followed by a wink. How come everything about this man was so contradictory?

Dorothy seemed to notice as she was tugging absently on the material to straighten it on her granddaughter's flawless figure, "Don't mind John," she said looking at Mia with an assuring smile, "He's in military mode. They all are. It's nothing personal honey."

"How did you know?"

"Because I married one." She smiled with understanding, "John's on duty. He was since they picked you up. Gage usually is the one with the expression etched in stone, but he's in love with you, so its only fitting that you see that side of him that no one else has."

"I never even thought about that." She said looking past her to John who'd resumed the task of scanning the store and the passing crowd outside the large storefront windows.

Dorothy lifted her arm and looked at her watch, "Well it's two o'clock and the party starts at five. So we'd better get you home. Not only that the caterers are due to arrive a three."

"I'm excited. I've never been to a party like this."

"Well darling, I hope they'll be plenty more because I love parties." Dorothy said causing Mia to laugh.

On the ride back to the General's, Mia took the opportunity to ask Dorothy some questions about Gage even though John was sitting across from them. It was still hard to get used to riding in a limousine but she had to admit it thrilled her.

"He said his parents were dead."

Dorothy pursed her lips and stared at her granddaughter, "They are, but Gage should talk to you about them."

"How long have you known him?"

"Since Thaddeus brought him home about six years ago. He was recovering from being shot." Mia gasped and Dorothy held up her hand to quell her worries, "He's a tough man Mia and as you can see, he's fine."

John cleared his throat, and Mia saw a smile tug at the corner of his mouth. Obviously the man admired Gage, just like she witnessed when they first met him.

"You said he saved your life?" she asked John. She was still nervous of him, but there was a reason why Gage trusted him with her, so she would trust him too.

He nodded, "He did. We were abandoned by our commander but Gage came back to rescue us." This time he did smile, "The first time that happened, General Thaddeus got us out. The second time, it was Gage. After that we formed our own militia."

"You work for money?"

He brought his unreadable gaze to hers, "Yes, but we don't do anything bad—any more." He grinned, "the stigma attached to the word Mercenary isn't always correct. Yes we work for money, sometimes a lot of money, but the deed we get hired for needs to be approved by Gage. The last one we did was about four months ago when we rescued a diplomat's kidnapped child

in the Middle East."

"Oh! So you still work like that?" the unmistakable sound of a cell phone went off and she watched John pull it out and shut it off while grinning as he shoved it back in his pocket. She was sure that was the sixth time it went off in an hour but he'd yet to answer it. Her grandmother's had rang once too, but unlike John she'd answered in the boutique but she couldn't hear the conversation because she'd walked outside to talk.

"we did," he stared down at her, "From what I hear, our sergeant is hanging up his rifle for some pretty gal he met in Montana."

Mia blushed. At least John didn't sound angry about it, but she supposed that they had made a lot of money doing what they did. Regardless, if the group was helping people she felt guilty. She didn't want to be responsible for someone's suffering if Gage's team could save them. She would have to speak to him about that.

Gage was pacing the porch restlessly as party supplies and staff started to arrive. Thad was sitting in a porch swing behind him smoking a cigar.

The older man grinned as Gage lifted his wrist to glance at his watch several times then he pulled out his cell phone again to call his man who wasn't answering. Thaddeus knew everything was fine because he'd called his wife a half an hour ago and informed Gage that everything was fine.

John was just aggravating Gage by not answering his. It wasn't unlike him at all. They always had a friendly rivalry going and John didn't like to be dictated to which is probably what Gage would do if the man answered his phone. He was given a job and he would do it without interference. If something had happened they would have heard about it because Rene was following the limo unseen. It was just an extra precautionary step that Dorothy and Mia didn't know about, but it still was

angering Gage that he didn't know how things were going.

When the familiar grey stretched car pulled up the drive Gage was off the steps and walking toward it with a long determined stride with a mixture of menace and worry in his expression.

John saw him and grinned. Gage had opened the door and gave him a deadly look but didn't say anything. "I don't need to be babysat." Was all John said as he walked off still grinning.

Gage cursed under his breath but still managed to replace his anger with a more pleasing expression when he reached in and took his fiancé's hand, "Did you enjoy yourself?" he asked squashing the urge to break John's nose.

"Oh yes, she spoiled me." She said happily to the older woman who was being helped out by the driver.

"She's easy to please." Said Dorothy, "Mason, please get the parcels out of the trunk."

"Yes ma'am." Said the driver as he turned and walked around the back of the car.

"If you don't mind," said Dorothy giving gage a warning look before taking Mia's hand out of Gages, "She's still mine until the party." She led Mia toward the house with the driver behind them holding half a dozen shopping bags. Mia shot him a sheepish grin over her shoulder and Gage placed his hands on his hips shaking his head.

"Leave Dorothy be," Thad said after the women went in the house, "She's missed out on eighteen years."

Gage gestured toward the house, and opened his mouth to say something, then stopped and bowed his head in defeat placing his hands back on his hips. Thad's laughter reached him through the throng of noise from the party setup. It looked like he wasn't the only one addicted to the woman and Thad had a valid point.

As the day wore on Gage found himself slipping into the

comfortable suit of emotional armor that allowed him to take control of many situations overseas. He dished out orders to his men which were immediately obeyed and John even gave him a nod of approval seeing him assume his command readily.

They had set up a makeshift security room in the General's library that covered all of the cameras set up around the party which Bruce was supervising. John and Rene had put on the elegant red and black waiters uniforms and Gage was adjusting the cuffs of his expensive tuxedo. He had hired extra men to frisk the guests as they arrived and gave them all a recent photo of Danny but they all knew it wasn't one hundred percent proof. Danny was talented and could easily change his appearance.

"I think I like your suit better." Said John looking at Gage's tux.

Gage smirked while scanning the small monitors, "Well, when you get engaged I'll wear that thing and you can wear the tux."

"God forbid!" he said with mock indignation causing several throaty chuckles.

Just then Thad rapped on the closed door and told Gage and the men to get out to the back patio where the guests were gathering.

Gage straightened himself to his full height and took on a serious expression making him look distinguishable and authoritative, "Okay men, let's make sure my girl stays unharmed." He held out his hand.

The other three placed theirs on his and murmured a series of agreements before they all left to take their places.

Upstairs, Dorothy's maid was just completing the finishing touches on Mia. She had swept her hair up off her nape and managed to pile it elegantly on top of her head with a few wisps escaping to tickle her neck. She was nervous. She knew that Thad was going to announce her engagement to Gage and she

wondered if her real father would somehow make it in to the party. A shudder went through her and she glanced up at her reflection. She was sad about that, her father, never knowing her mother or her grandparents until now. George and Marie were still her parents as far as she was concerned.

A soft knock on the door let her know that Thad was there to escort her down to the party. She stood up wishing it was Gage, but she knew he was busy seeing to her safety. Her heart swelled thinking of him.

"My dear, you are lovely." Thad said with warmth in his eyes while gripping her shoulders. He bent down and kissed her soft cheek affectionately. "You look so much like your mother." He added feeling moisture prick his eyes.

Mia saw it and felt terrible for him. It must've been horrible to lose a child in such a way. She herself was upset, but she never knew her mother, so it wasn't as bad as what Dorothy and Thad went through she was sure. What she did feel was robbed and part of that made her angry at the man who was biologically her father. She looked at him shyly, "Dor—my grandmother bought the gown." She said trying to distract him. It hurt her to see him upset.

"Dorothy has a way with fashion." He said holding out his arm which she took. "Are you scared?" he said studying her expression.

"Absolutely terrified." She admitted as he led her towards the long staircase.

"Well when we get to the crowd, Gage is going to take over as your escort—but," he shot her a look, "That doesn't mean he gets all of the dances."

Mia smiled, "no, of course not."

Nothing could have prepared her for how devastating Gage looked in a tuxedo. Obviously she wasn't the only one who noticed seeing the crowd of young woman around him.

However when he caught a glimpse of her coming out of the patio doors on her grandfather's arm, he brushed them like they didn't exist and she felt awash with pride and love for him.

"Thank you General." Gage said taking Mia's hand without even taking his eyes off of her to acknowledge the other man.

"My pleasure." He said with amusement in his tone before he walked away.

"My God Mia, you could bring me to my knees in that gown." He said huskily while placing her arm through his.

"Quit it." She breathed looking up at him feeling her cheeks heat up.

"I just keep thinking that I'm the only one that knows what lies underneath and you have no idea how that makes a man like me feel."

"Gage!" she whispered, "People will hear you."

He grinned down at her before he bent and pressed his lips to her temple, "Mine." He mouthed against her skin before leading her down the stone steps and into the crowd.

Chapter Six

There were a lot of people that had their attention on the handsome couple, but only one narrowed his eyes. His hand went instinctively to the knife in the waistband of his uniform, patted it twice and resumed walking through the crowd.

Mia, he thought, she's the key.

If he got rid of her, the voices would stop, they told him so. She wasn't his anyway, they told him that too. She was from the devil.

He was a slender man, but he managed to pad his suit and stuff his cheeks with cotton to fool the security guards. Only the staff didn't get padded down and he'd been watching the beauty

since early afternoon. Although he hadn't had a chance to get close to her, he would tonight.

He reached up and scratched an area under his fake moustache. He'd dyed his hair to. It had long since gone grey in prison. Actually he was quite impressed with his disguise after being in prison for eighteen years. He thought he did a good job. His eyes guided to the Thaddeus who was celebrating his birthday and part of him wanted to kill him too, but the voices said that he wasn't responsible. His eyes went back to Glenda, and the big man beside her. He knew he'd have to take out the man because of the way he was looking at her, he knew they were together—*Glenda—no, no—that was Mia*, he fought for control. Those stupid drugs they filled him with in prison were still swimming in his skull. Only he stopped taking them several weeks ago when he knew he would be released on parole. He became an expert on how to fool the doctors.

Before long Dorothy got up and gave her speech to Thaddeus which was followed by a round of cheers and applause. Then it was Thaddeus' turn. Danny took that opportunity to weave through the crowd toward the girl hardly hearing what he had to say. Stupid fool! He thought. He was going to get rid of her and the old man couldn't stop him. Just like he did Glenda but he took his time with her. She didn't confess that she was responsible for the voices so he had to force it out of her. Finally in the end, when he brought out the baby she did. She screamed it from the rooftops, right before he gutted her.

He actually didn't expect such a large crowd, but it did him good for the camouflage it gave him. His eyes focused on the couple with determination as he made his way slowly toward them. It was obvious from the way he was looking at her and the way his arm was around her waist that coveted her, much like he did his Glenda until he found out it was her that planted

the voices in his head.

Danny frowned, the man would die next to his so-called daughter because he didn't know what kind of spell she could weave. It was obvious that he was already bewitched.

He moved closer as the General stood up on the stage and proudly announced his granddaughter's engagement causing Danny to pause not a hundred feet from them through the applause of the crowd as the young man bent and kissed the woman. It was a kiss of ultimate love and fiery passion and for a moment he had a flash of him kissing her mother, Glenda.

He paused again reaching under his waiter's jacket to seize the hilt of the knife. Glenda was beautiful and looking at the woman in the middle of the dance floor bent over the man's arm while he kissed her made him remember how beautiful she was. Even when he was going to kill her and she knew he was going to she kept telling him how much she loved him, but the voices told him that she was lying. His expression darkened. She was lying.

He reached up and gripped a clump of his hair as the voices started again telling him that she was the last and if he killed her they would stop.

Moving quickly he made his way on to the dance floor just as the man was straightening up and lifting his hand to acknowledge the cheers of the crowd while the beautiful woman's face was scarlet tinged and smiling shyly.

Several more feet and he'd take the large man first, then the woman with precision accuracy. Like the war, he'd planned the kill down to the last step, but then something caught his eye.

The man turned enough so Danny could see the wire of an earpiece and as he noticed it he stiffened and whirled toward him. It was too late for him to stop, he was too close and pulled the knife.

It was so quick that it took Mia and the other's too realize

what had happened when Gage suddenly released her and turned to a man behind them. Then she saw the knife right before it embedded itself in Gage's shoulder.

"Gage!" she screamed and she wasn't the only one. People were screaming everywhere.

Gage managed to backhand Danny but he didn't release the knife. When he flew back he took it out of his shoulder and Gage could feel it scrape bone as it left his body causing more pain than it did going in. He didn't yell though, he was trying to focus. "Mia get behind me!" he hollered at her not taking his eyes from the other man. As it was she was standing stunned off to the side but between the both of them as Danny crouched low ready to spring again. That warning brought Danny's eyes to Mia and Gage didn't miss the deadly look there. He moved toward her but Gage was quicker and positioned himself between the two. Fuck his shoulder hurt, but he needed to stall the man until John and Rene got there. Blood was pouring down the front of his tuxedo pulsing out of the wound.

Danny's eyes flicked back to the other man, "She'll put a spell on you to." He said in a low emotionless voice.

Gage didn't answer him, he knew the man was too far gone to listen. It was the look in his eyes. It was hollow, cold.

"I'll whittle you away piece by piece if I have to." He added lunging for him.

Gage evaded the jab and brought his elbow down on the man's arm but he was too skilled to release the knife. All he did was duck and roll and come to his feet easily as if he was born to it. Gage had been well trained in hand to hand combat, but it was obvious to him that Danny was too despite. Despite his age and his imprisonment, he'd kept up his skills. Time seemed to drag on forever as the two fought hand to hand, one with a weapon and one without, yet it was only seconds.

Mia fell to her knees weeping. She could see the other man

moving with ease and skill that matched Gage. Twice more he was able to sink the knife into him and she turned her head no longer able to watch.

Gage could feel himself weaken along with the hot bath of blood seeping down his side and his leg from the other two wounds, so he played it. He acted weak and when Danny moved again he took him down.

Mia turned her head back to see her father leap on Gage and raise the knife to plunge in his chest she screamed, "Dad—NO!" he paused and looked at her. She saw a cloud of recognition in his eyes for a nanosecond before he grunted and fell over.

Gage had pulled the knife from his ankle strap that he always carried and sunk it into Danny's side and ended it with a violent twist. Then he laid his head back and closed his eyes feeling the pain of his wounds all the way through to his teeth.

"Gage!"

He could hear Mia's wrenching voice but he felt so tired. He could even feel the softness of her hands running over him along with the pleading in her voice not to leave her.

John and Rene burst thought the crowd with Bruce closely behind them. He'd seen Danny in the surveillance monitors and warned Gage the moment he'd seen him.

Thad was kneeling beside Mia putting pressure on Gage's wounds. She started screaming and he told John to get her out of there. There was a lot of blood, and if Gage was going to be a bastard and die right then and there, he wouldn't let his granddaughter be witness to it.

"Gage you son of a bitch, you hold on." He said tersely as sirens were heard in the background. He felt some satisfaction at the grunt he got in response from the man on the ground. Rene whipped off his belt and was wrapping it around Gage's leg where one of the other wounds was. It was the abdominal

wound that frightened Thad. It was bleeding too much and he couldn't stop it.

Chapter Seven

The funeral was held on the following Saturday but not many people were in attendance. Mia stood over the hole the coffin was hoisted into and tossed a single red rose on the casket.

John moved his arm around her and gave her shoulder a squeeze.

She was too numb to feel grief or even wonder if it was in her to do so. It was a horrible way to die, but Gage had saved her like he said he would. Her eyes guided to the ring and she fingered it with her other hand.

"come on Mia." John finally said, "This is over. Gage is probably driving the hospital staff nuts by now."

"It's just so sad," she said taking a final look at the casket, "That I never knew him before."

"Well he has to make his peace with God now after what he's done." John added guiding her back to the car where her grandparents were waiting.

She had insisted on coming because she knew there was no one else to grieve for the man who fathered her. Gage gave her his blessing so she went. For some reason John seemed to have elected himself her protector even though it wasn't necessary anymore, but she was sure Gage had something to do with that. He was still wary about not being with her for her protection, but at least he'd get out of the hospital tomorrow, then they could go home.

As it was, Gage was in the middle of tossing a tray across the room as a nurse walked in. She just spun around and walked out again followed by his cursing. He didn't like feeling like an

invalid and even though the doctor told him of the risks if he started moving around too soon, he didn't care.

Finally he laid his head back against the pillow and shut his eyes. All he saw was his sweet Mia and smiled.

Unfortunately when he woke up from the surgery several days ago, it was John's ugly mug standing over him, not Mia's and he made the groggy comment to the fact.

John frowned at him, "That's what I get for devoted years of service." The man muttered.

"Where's my future wife?"

"Heavily sedated."

"Ah hell." He groaned.

"I'm fine thanks." John said.

"Asshole."

He chuckled, "She's fine Gage. She was hysterical but after what she'd been through, it's understandable. I'm sure it's hard seeing someone you love knifed several times."

"Is she seriously going to be okay?"

"Funny you ask that when you're the one with a busted clavicle and some of your internal organs punctured." He waved a dismissive hand as Gage's expression darkened, "I'm pretty sure she will. When she wakes up and sees that you came through the surgery, she'll be back to her cheerful self, you lucky bastard."

Gage actually chuckled then winced at the wave of pain that came with it. "Don't I know it."

John squeezed his good shoulder, "Look, I'll bring her in as soon as she wakes up."

"I'd appreciate that." He said searching his friend's face, "Did her father make it."

John shook his head, "The funeral is this Saturday."

"Knowing Mia she'll want to go." There was no doubt in his mind because that's the way she was. Even though she never

knew the man as her father, part of her would be grieving for the loss of that.

"I'll take her." John said without hesitation.

"Thanks."

He leaned over his friend a little more, "You seriously love this girl, don't you?"

"Can't you tell." He said with raised brows.

"Well, I can understand why now. It was really hard to take when you told us. We didn't think you actually had a heart in there." He said tapping Gage's chest with his fingers, "And if you did it was made of iron."

"Maybe it was." He said solemnly.

"All I can say, if there's hope for you, then maybe the rest of us have a chance."

Gage grinned, "Don't doubt it. I was blindsided."

"Yeah she kind of finds that tender side in all of us, I think."

"Don't get any ideas." Gage warned.

"Yeah, like I want to piss you off." He said smiling down at him. "I'll go see if Mia's awake. Dorothy and Thad are with her right now."

It was about a half an hour before John walked in with Mia. His arm was around her waist to steady her, but as soon as she saw him she rushed forward and planted sweet little kisses all over his face.

He kissed her cheek and used his good arm to hold her. He heard the sound of his room door closing knowing that John had left. "I don't ever remember you smelling so good honey." He murmured in her ear and inhaled deeply.

She lifted her head and looked at him, "God I was so scared."

He saw her red swollen eyes. Even the tip of her nose was still swollen. He brushed his fingers down her cheek, "I've been shot, stabbed, even run over, but I've survived. Do you think a

few stab wounds would kill me? Besides I just got engaged."

She lowered her head again so their cheeks were touching, "I never felt so scared Gage. It seems as if I'd just found you and you were taken away." She released a sniff, "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I am. Pretty soon we'll be back to making babies."

She flushed and slapped his chest playfully, "We weren't!"

"We were definitely trying to perfect the act." He said deeply.

"You are really asking for it."

"I'm trying. Do you think the doctor would clear a lewd act here in the hospital."

"Oh God," she said rolling her eyes, "You're barely a day out of surgery and you already thinking of that."

He became serious, "I've been thinking about quite a few things Mia." He said softly, "I'm serious about our marriage, staying in Scott Springs and having children with you."

"I know you are Gage." She returned with her expression full of emotion for him, "I trust you."

"I know you do, so there's some things I need to tell you."

"Now?"

"No other time is better." He said searching out her hand and squeezing it. "There shouldn't be any secrets between us, and I have plenty. My missions overseas won't be mentioned but there's other things you need to know about me."

She took a deep breath, hoping his secrets weren't horrible, like he had other women on the side, or he worked for a drug cartel.

"First of all, I'm not twenty six."

"Oh?"

"The whole issue with our involvement wasn't supposed to happen, but I needed to keep you close. I originally was just going to date you in the plutonic sense," he said letting a smile

spread across his face while remembering their first night together, "However, things changed and we did become intimate."

She flushed slightly.

"I was worried when you found out how old I really was, if I was truthful with you before then, that you wouldn't want me."

"That's ridiculous." She said immediately.

"I'm thirty two."

She looked thoughtful for a moment before she smiled, "I don't care."

"The documents about my age were forged. I knew your father wouldn't let me near you if he knew my real age."

Now he was probably dead on about that because her father had a problem with twenty-six. "What's the next thing?" It certainly wasn't as bad as what she thought. Besides love shouldn't have an age difference, but his hesitation around her made perfect sense now.

"Honey you are a treat." He said smiling.

"Is it your name?"

"No that's legitimate."

"Are you parents really dead?"

"Very." He frowned. "I guess you should know about them too."

"If you feel like you want to talk about it." She said meeting his gaze with one of understanding.

"Well, my dad was a narcissistic bastard and my mother was a spoiled socialite."

"It couldn't have been that bad." She said in a shocked whisper.

"You have no idea." He angled his head to study her expression better. "I was in military and boarding schools from the time I could walk and they had a rule that children should be seen and not heard. My father had no qualms about taking a

strap to me when I disobeyed him. Then Jane came along. My mother ignored both of us and concentrated on her social circles while my father tried his best to mold the perfect children."

"That's horrible."

"I honestly thought I was a callous bastard like him, except for the love I have for Jane—" he reached up and caressed her cheek, "—and you. That's what made the things I did for our government so easy. I had no problem killing people in their name."

"John said you don't do things like that anymore."

He released a short laugh, "Well, Thad was good to me and my men. He made me realize some things. Especially when he came in and got us out when no one else cared. I was shot up pretty bad during one mission. It took me two years to heal completely and I stayed with him and Dorothy. If I had a choice in decent parents, it would be them."

"I can't see you like you said you were." She said with worried eyes, "I only know you as you are now."

"That's fine. You won't have to. I told you what entails our future and I meant it. There's no going back for me Mia."

She nodded visibly relieved.

"Now for the last thing."

"You were born with a tail." She teased trying to bring some humor into the room.

"Not quite." His eyes searched hers as he smiled slightly at her jest, "Evan Parson's sold me his place. He's not a family friend. It went on the market in Europe and I bought it."

She shrugged, "So, its beautiful. What's wrong with that?" gosh, she thought, that must have been some mortgage, the place was worth millions.

"I paid cash."

She blinked twice. John had mentioned that they made money doing what they did but she never considered that he

was rich. "Cash?"

"The jet is mine too." He said watching the emotions play over her face. "I own a penthouse in New York, a villa in Spain, several flats in London—" he paused seeing her jaw drop, "Sorry baby, I know I'm asking a lot of understanding from you."

"But you work as a cop, it's dangerous. Of all the jobs you could do," She said, "And being a policeman isn't easy—"

"I told you once before that not one of my pennies was earned through blood and sweat. I meant it. My parents were rich and it's in a trust for Jane when she turns twenty one. I don't want a cent of their money. I make sure she understands every cent she gets too."

"You are not like anyone I've ever met." She said looking down at him with genuine affection, "you are true to the bone Gage Hart and that's why I love you."

"You're not upset?"

She shook her head bending down and kissing him. After what she'd just been through, there was nothing he could say that would change her mind about him. He nearly gave his life for her. He growled against her mouth.

Ten minutes later, that's how the group found them much to Mia's embarrassment and Gage's ever expanding ego.

Epilogue

Six months later Mia's wedding was beautiful. Her father and grandfather gave her away. Gage's handwritten vows made her weep. His arm was still in a sling, but they told people that it broke in a sky diving accident.

Gage was devastating handsome in his black suit with high mandarin collar as were his best men, John and of all people, Liam. Somehow he'd managed to mend that fence and Mia was very proud of him. Gage had found out that his parents were

both dead and Charlie and he had to raise themselves since they were fourteen and sixteen with the help of an ailing grandmother who died when Liam was eighteen. For two boys being raised without parents they didn't turn out too bad, he confided in her.

Lisa and Jane were her bridesmaids wearing simple gowns of soft green and that was the first time Liam had laid eyes on Gage's little sister. He'd spent the rest of the evening following her around and ended up getting a fat lip for his efforts.

"She can take care of herself Mia." Gage said as Liam was holding a handkerchief to his busted lip while glaring at a smug Jane.

"I take it you taught her that."

"you have no idea what she is capable of." He said holding her tightly on the dance floor.

"I wondered why you never did anything when he followed her outside."

He grinned down at her.

"Poor Liam." Mia said looking at him while he was still glaring at the younger girl. He was a nice man, and nice looking too, but he just had a very odd approach with women.

"It serves him right when he keeps trying to grope women."

"He was drunk and he didn't grope me, he only flattened me out on the bed and kissed me." She murmured in his ear smiling at the harsh tone, "Besides I thought you forgave him."

Gage felt his ire rising over remembering that night, "Maybe, but he should ask permission before he tries to kiss one again."

"hmm, like you did me." She said reminding him.

He chuckled, "point taken." He actually just told her that he was going to kiss her before he did that first time at Craigen's gully and it went a little further than just a simple kiss. "He's too old for her anyway."

“He’s twenty Gage. There’s only four years difference and like you told me before, it’s not like he’s had much guidance without parents.”

“Then she’s too young.” He scowled.

“Hmm, but very mature.”

“Keep it up and I’ll turn you over my knee and give you more than just a spanking.”

She felt her insides swirl at that, “Promises, promises.”

“I’ll make an effort to get you pregnant tonight and withhold that agreement to wait until your twenty.”

She smiled up at him, “That was your wish, not mind Gage. I’ll have your child anytime.” She didn’t end up pregnant at her grandparents like he worried about, but both of them were consigned to wait until after they were married to make that step. However, the more she fell in love with her husband, the more she wanted to have his child. Husband, she breathed, how wonderful that sounded.

“You’re too young.” He grimaced, “I told you it makes me feel as if I’m taking your youth.”

A teasing glint came to her deep blue eyes, “Well you are getting a little long in the tooth—maybe we should—” her squeal cut off her words as he swept her up in his arms and marched out of the hall to the laughter and applause of the guests. There was no doubt from the look on his expression what he was going to do. Mia knew it would take months to overcome that embarrassment, but looking up at Gage she suddenly didn’t care.

“Your wish is my command,” he said huskily mingling with her laughter.

Mercenary's Conquest