



*Dirty Dream*

*By*

*Mina Carter & Evey Meyer*

## **Dirty Dream by Mina Carter & Evey Myer**

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### **Dirty Dream**

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## **Dedication**

Friends are angels who lift us up when we forget how to fly...or something like that. Whichever, we'd like to dedicate this book to our friends because without them our world would be a duller place.

## **Chapter One**

Rollie Gavilan. Award winning scientist, developments engineer, and a piece of ass most men would pay good money to get some action from. However, Dayton Vann, Day to the few people he called friend, wasn't most men, and he wasn't paying to get some action from Rollie.

He was being paid.

His lips quirked. The sort of action he was being paid—and well—for, his target wasn't going to be happy about. It was less the sexual sort—more was the pity—and more the snatch-and-grab type.

Day was being paid to kidnap Rollie. And it was turning out to be one of the easiest jobs he'd ever had.

For a company paranoid enough to have concealed Gavilan's real identity with a stand-in—an austere-looking woman in her early fifties—they were extremely lax on security once he got past the outer perimeter.

Getting past that outer perimeter had been laughably easy. All it had taken were a bunch of fake references, easy enough to obtain, and a month's work in the local pizza restaurant. Then add in a nice little accident for the guy who usually did the late-night Gavilan lab delivery, and Day had his opening.

Yeah, one had to love the average workaholic nerd's reliance on fast food. Amusement filled him as he walked down the corridor, searching for the right lab. He'd ditched the pizza place uniform, discarding it in the same closet that now held an unconscious lab assistant.

Fortunately, the lab assistant had been easy to dispense with. Unfortunately—Day swore silently as he tugged at the lapels that didn't quite meet in front—the coat's previous owner had been considerably smaller. Even badly fitting, it made him look as if he belonged, and it had the required security badge clipped to the front top pocket. The one with the pens all neatly lined up and color coordinated.

Day shook his head. *What sort of nerd lined pens up like that?*

He reached an intersection and paused. He was out of place and he knew it. After all, not many scientists looked as though they could bench press a couple hundred pounds with ease. Confidence was the key to a successful infiltration. Look as if you knew what you were doing, that you belonged in the place, and people never questioned you. Carry a clipboard and they scurried to get out of the way. Spying one on a rack, he snagged it as he passed. He held it loosely in the crook of his arm, using it to cover the fact the picture on the badge was obviously not him.

He scanned the numbers on the lab doors as he counted down to the right number. His time was running out. The nerd stuffed in the cleaning closet was going to wake up soon, and Day needed to be out of here with Gavilan before that happened. Trouble was, he still had to locate her.

As luck would have it, a door ahead of him opened, and the woman in question stepped out into the hallway. Her attention was fixed on the coffee machine opposite with the determination of the seriously caffeine addicted. Day hid his smile. He looked like that before his mug of java in the morning, so he could sympathize.

He allowed his gaze to wander over her as he approached, and his interest had nothing at all to do with her as a woman. He was assessing her height and weight. If the worse came to worst, he was going to have to knock her unconscious and carry her out. Doable, he decided as he slid into place behind her as though waiting for his turn at the machine. She was on the slender side and a lot smaller than he was.

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Forty-nine. Forty-nine hours, twenty-seven minutes and eleven seconds since Rollie had gotten out of her bed and donned the coat. Well, technically, since she collapsed into bed and had fallen asleep in her clothes last night, she hadn't really donned it. She yawned and rubbed her cheek. She was starting to feel like a close cousin of the Crypt-keeper. And if she weren't careful, she'd start to look like him, too. God, she could already feel the bags forming under her eyes like a set of matched luggage.

Good thing the day was just about over. All she needed to do was to file the papers she'd been working on, and she'd be able to head on home. On a normal day, she'd leave them on her desk, but tomorrow was a weekend, and the cleaning service would be all over the place again. She always left special instructions not to touch her desk, but she was afraid that someone wouldn't understand, or bother to read the note. The last time, four months worth of research had ended up in the shredders. She and her staff had spent two weeks pasting them all up again into coherent pages. It wasn't something she wanted to repeat any time soon.

Rollie didn't like the limelight. It was more trouble than it was worth. So, for most people, Caroline Gavilan appeared to be a kind and elegant woman who, on a good day, could pass for being in her late thirties. Unable to think of anyone else she trusted enough to act in her stead, Rollie had turned to her close friend—her only friend—Marie Deline. Well-placed donations had allowed Gavilan Technologies Corporation (GTC) to complete the transformation Marie, a former elementary science teacher, into the award-winning Doctor Caroline Gavilan. Now it was Marie's face on all the news reports as Dr. Caroline Gavilan, and Marie who faced the press conference cameras.

For the few people who knew the truth, the real Rollie was in her late twenties and looked more like a post grad student than the experienced scientist and businesswoman that Marie portrayed in public. With the exception of her physical appearance, she was a stereotypical scientist; a workaholic with a coffee addiction. She feared she'd eventually croak at the end of a long career spent indoors, standing at her lab table, poring over research data.

Right now, though, the photon reactor project was too important to let trivial fears override it. It was just something that had to be done soon for the sake of...well, everyone. The PR had been the culmination of her original thesis at Carnegie Mellon, and after years upon years of trying to get to the bottom of the photon/anti-photon conversion theory, a week ago she and her staff had finally cracked it.

Accidentally, yes, but still a breakthrough. So, if and when the technology became available to the world, everyone would be able to say goodbye to fossil fuel worries and power problems forever. Photon reactors—cheap, efficient, environment friendly and powerful—would become the answer to the world's power and environmental crises.

The presence of someone behind her interrupted her thoughts. Strange. She thought everyone had gone home, but after years of working in a lab, she knew that she wasn't the only night owl running the risk of severe sleep deprivation while trying to get to the bottom of something. She moved aside to give the person behind her a chance at the coffee.

"Working late too, 'eh?" she asked as she poured sugar into her cup.

"Yeah," the deep voice drawled as the sounds of another cup being poured reached her ears. "Boss is a slave driver. Got called in late to wrap up some reports."

Maybe it was because of the extraordinary amount of time she had spent locked up in labs and poring over reports that she hadn't even gotten a chance to talk to a man in a social situation. Maybe it was the lateness of the hour, or maybe it was fatigue. Whatever it was, the man's voice alone was enough to get Rollie's attention. She expected another one of the bookish types, or researchers, or maybe a middle-aged engineer. So when she looked up, she didn't expect to see a rough and rugged demi-god whose lab coat didn't quite fit the broad shoulders and the hint of tightly corded muscles under the fabric.

It didn't stop there. The face was just as heart stopping. A strong chin, wide brows, and dimples from his slight smile made him look adorable. His eyes were the most intense dark hazel with flecks of gold. His smile was tired and polite, but for some reason, she could feel his gaze

burning right through her clothes.

"Sorry to hear that," said Rollie. "Though, if it makes you feel any better, you're not the only one who's got some late-night assignments to work out. Coming in or heading out?"

"Hopefully heading out soon." He lifted the mug to take a sip and watched her over the rim. "You?"

"Same. Just putting away some files, and then I can finally get some sleep." She took a sip of her coffee. "I just hope this is the last coffee I'll be drinking in a while. I could sleep for days!"

He smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling engagingly as he put the mug down on the counter near the coffee pot. The movement made the lab coat shift, stretching over his shoulders.

"Now that would make my job a lot easier." His voice was low, the charming note still in it, but his eyes were hard as he moved the clipboard he carried a little to reveal the butt of a firearm concealed under the white jacket.

"Scream, and I'll shoot. Run, and I'll shoot. In fact, the only way for you to avoid getting shot is to keep your mouth shut and do as you're told. Understand me?"

At first, it didn't register with her, but the sense of danger became stronger by the second until the truth hit her like a sledgehammer. He was kidnapping her. She should have known something was wrong. The way the lab coat didn't fit him, how different he looked from any other person she usually saw in here. The fact that, even though the lab complex had two-thousand registered employees, this was the first time she'd seen him. That should have made her suspicious. But she was tired, he was hunky, and she hadn't been on guard.

"What do you want?" she asked, all friendliness gone and replaced with a scowl.

"You to be quiet and behave," he replied, motioning for her to turn around. "Now, we're just going to take a nice little walk. No funny stuff or you know what happens." He nudged her to start walking down the corridor. As they started moving, he slammed an elbow into the fire alarm switch, setting it off.

"Okay, just don't poke me with your thingy," she retorted. "It's embarrassing. Maybe I'll pretend it's a snub-nosed revolver or something." And she wasn't just referring to his gun.

Funny thing about Rollie; when she was in high-stress situations, she didn't react the same way as other people did. Most panicked. Some tried to rationalize with barely reined-in fear. Rollie, on the other hand, became sassy. It had been a childhood survival mechanism. And being kidnapped was definitely a high stress situation.

"Pretend whatever you like, sweetheart. As long as you keep your mouth shut and keep moving, I don't much care." His voice was hard behind her, but he kept close, the heat of his big body burning right through her lab coat and reminding her just how large the guy was.

Corridors passed in a blur as the alarms echoed through them. He led her to the back of the buildings, toward the service area. She had to admit, as a tactic, it was working well. There weren't many people who knew she was in the building tonight, and it would take some time for them to sort through the confusion and then send someone to look for her. By that time, they'd be gone to God knows where.

She felt small and vulnerable, and she didn't like it one bit. Moving faster, she kept as much distance between them as she could. They passed by so many surveillance cameras, she was sure that somehow, someone would know that she'd been abducted. They were also passing by so many consoles, she tried to calculate how much time she'd need to access one and call for help. She'd left her Blackberry in her office, and she didn't have anything else on her. Just a few personal items and the clothes on her back.

Her high-performance brain was clicking a mile a minute as she tried to come up with a plan. She just needed to find the right moment, then she'd strike back. Right now though, the hard butt of the gun in the waistband of his pants kept pressing against the small of her back, reminding her that the danger she was in was serious. Despite what she had said earlier, she hoped it was his gun that was doing the poking.

He moved her at a fast pace, not allowing her time to go for anything in her pockets or to try for one of the consoles. Before long, they

were in the last corridor, and she could see the darkness of the night outside through the window. There was movement behind her, and the pressure in the small of her back became harder, more focused, as he pressed the muzzle into her back, just over her spine.

"Remember what I said," he whispered in her ear as they headed for the last door. "No funny stuff. My employers don't give a crap whether you walk again, and I'll do whatever I need to."

Rollie had never responded well to threats. Sure, she was scared for her life, but she didn't like the fact that she was being bullied and couldn't do anything about it. It reminded her too much of growing up.

"Who would your employers happen to be?" she asked. "Blackwell? I know he'd love to pick my brain to get some of the inventions he can only dream of. Or are you some sort of terrorist? I have to tell you, Guantanamo Bay isn't exactly its best this time of year, and the locals aren't that friendly to your kind."

Reaching past her to push the door open, he hustled her through, and all but shoving her out into the darkness.

"If I was a terrorist, then we wouldn't be having this conversation," he said shortly. "I'd have just wired the place to blow and watched it burn from afar. Now, the truck. Move." He motioned with his gun hand, the metal glinting dully.

"Yeah, you're right," she retorted. "If you were a terrorist, you would actually know just how much more I'm worth to a Jihadist cause than burning down a lab I can have rebuilt in a few weeks. And what kind of a kidnapper are you? Aren't you supposed to have the ominous black van with tinted windows and the ski mask?"

His lips quirked a little, amusement in the depths of his eyes. "Quite the little expert on kidnapping, aren't you? I'll make sure to get it right next time," he assured her and nodded toward the fairly innocuous looking truck sitting next to the dumpsters. The one she was trying like hell to avoid. Once he got her in that, it was all over.

"I don't think that'd be too easy to pull off, since you'll be locked in a jail cell before I'm through with you," said Rollie. "And as much as I hate clichés, I've got to say, you're not going to get away with this."

"Sweetheart, I already have." He flashed a grin, teeth white in the dim light as he shoved the gun back into his waistband again. His hand closed hard on her arm, holding her in place as he opened the truck door. Her heart pounded; if she was going to do something, it had to be now.

While he was distracted by the door and looking around to see if anyone had spotted them, Rollie took the chance to twist from his grip and deliver a move as old as men had been men and women had been women. She drove a justified knee to his groin.

There was an, "Oomph," as the air left his lungs. He doubled over for a second, clutching at his abused genital region. Either he had balls of steel, or she hadn't caught him full on. Within a second, he was after her. She didn't get more than three steps before hard hands closed over her upper arms, spinning her around and slamming her hard against a broad chest. Eyes glittering with fury clashed against hers, his hand fisting in the hair at the nape of her neck to drag her head back painfully.

"Don't try that again," he warned, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

Her heart pounded so hard she thought it would burst out of her chest. She tried so hard not to be afraid of him, but it was getting more difficult as he looked at her with cold lethality. She recognized the look. This was a man who had killed before, but she wasn't one to admit defeat so easily.

"Obviously," she ground out. "I don't think I hit anything."

"I wouldn't be very good at my job if a pretty little thing like you could bring me down, now would I?" he asked, his eyes warming up as he stroked a finger down her jaw-line. "Now behave before I start thinking on just how pretty you are. My employers don't care what sort of condition you're in, so I don't think they'd be opposed to me having a little...fun."

She tried not to shiver as he dragged his finger over her face. Damn it! She swore at her sex-starved mind and susceptible body. It didn't help that her breasts were flattened against his chest and she could feel the vibration from his low-timbered voice through them every time he spoke.

Here she was being kidnapped and threatened by a goon, albeit a good-looking one, and all her body could think about was sex. She had to

keep her mind in the game and her wits with her, or she might not survive this.

“If you want to know what a stiletto boot jammed in your gut feels like, just try it, buddy,” she retorted.

He shrugged. “Been there, done that, got the scar to prove it. Now are you going to be a good girl and get in the truck, or am I going to have to get rough?”

“They probably didn’t know how to do the job right,” she retorted as she reluctantly got in the truck. She didn’t see any other option, and the only time she had seen eyes that were that cold and determined was several years ago when she stared into a mirror. She knew better than to doubt his threats of harming her to get what he wanted. Just because she knew she didn’t have a way out didn’t mean she had to go through with this happily. “Don’t worry, when I get the chance, I’ll do a better job. I promise,” she told him through clenched teeth.

## **Chapter Two**

She was a feisty little thing, all right. Day slid a glance at the sleeping form in the passenger seat. She was half-curved in the seat, his jacket thrown over her to keep her warm and to cover the fact that zip ties tightly secured her wrists. She'd stayed awake longer than he'd thought but, despite the adrenalin granted by fear, she'd given into exhaustion a couple of hours ago.

He shifted in his seat and tried to ease the ache in his thigh. He'd had less than a second to react when she'd kneed him, enough to try and deflect a blow that should have had him on the floor retching his guts up. He'd only managed to deflect the blow, so he was going to be sore for a while in the old tackle. Ignoring the ache, he concentrated on the road ahead.

She'd been quieter after he'd gotten her in the truck. He assumed the threat of being raped had kept her quiet; it subdued all but the feistiest. Unlike pain or violence, that particular threat played over and over in their minds, keeping them quiet in a way other threats didn't.

Not that he would ever stoop that low. All he had to do was snatch her and keep her out of the picture until some conference or other she was supposed to be attending was over, and that was all. Despite his earlier comments to her, he did not intend to leave any permanent damage.

He wasn't being paid to hurt her, so he wouldn't. He didn't do that sort of job. He was independent now, so he picked and chose what sort of jobs he would take. Like this one, which was just up his alley. A nice

cushy job: snatch a female scientist and baby-sit her for a while. Easy money.

A few minutes later, she started to wake. Sitting up straight, she brushed the hair out of her face with her hands and tried to see where they were. She blinked a few times, as though getting the fuzziness from her sight. Then realization set in, and she viewed the landscape outside the window. Her voice was sleep-laden and husky when she asked, "Where are you taking me?"

He reached over and pulled the jacket back over her hands. They were moving at a fast clip, but one never knew what people would manage to get a glimpse of through a window. He knew better than to leave it to chance.

"Some place quiet and out the way for a few days." His voice was non-committal, although from the scenery through the windshield it was obvious they were heading into mountain territory.

He had a small cabin in the foothills. Far enough out of town that he could keep her presence there quiet for a few days, but near enough not to be completely isolated. At the least, he'd be able to drive down into town and grab a six-pack and other essential supplies.

"Well, at least you know where you're headed. For a second there, I thought you got us lost."

Apparently this woman was just as feisty waking up.

"So why did you kidnap me? Ransom?"

Her voice was sharp and as inquisitive as the look in her eyes. Day couldn't help but admire her spirit, even in a situation like this. Kidnapped and bound in the passenger seat of a truck with a guy she didn't know from Adam, she was still demanding.

"No, I've already been paid," he said, keeping his eyes on the road. He didn't need to be talking to her, shouldn't talk to her. She was a job, nothing more. Trouble was, she was a damn pretty one, as his body kept reminding him. He shifted in the seat again, ignoring the very physical reaction to her presence and the delicate perfume that filled the cabin.

She was quiet for a while, as if she were contemplating his answer.

"Look, the least you can do is tell me." She continued to look out

the window. "You're going to kill me, anyway. At least let me know why." Her words were a dispassionate statement, as if she expected the worst and tried to brace herself for the inevitable.

He slid a sharp glance at her, surprised. "Why on earth would you assume I'm going to kill you?" he asked, curious despite himself. After all, wasn't that why he was schooling himself not to talk to her, not to get close to her? In case the order came through to kill her after all?

Grimly, he reminded himself that he'd been paid for a job, this job, and *only* this job. He didn't take orders anymore, and certainly not that sort. He had once, and the black stain on his soul would never go away.

"You said you've already been paid, and you're not even thinking about ransom, so this isn't about money. Not from me at least," she rationalized. "Your face was on the surveillance cameras, and your biometrics were recorded in the lab the second you set foot in it. Someone from my company will check you against all known databases when they realize I'm missing. With our systems, it won't take them long to find you. Though, the real point here is that I've seen your face, and I don't think you'd believe me if I told you I wouldn't go to the cops to ID you if you let me go."

He didn't look at her, maneuvering into the other lane on the highway. "You're assuming that those systems were actually working," he commented mildly. It was an attitude he'd come across before. Because of the way he looked, people assumed he was more beefcake than brains. It used to irritate him, but now he found it mildly amusing. He was—had been—an infiltration specialist. That he wouldn't have known what the security setup was and found a way around it was, well, laughable.

"Okay, so do you want me to give you a gold star?" said Rollie, clearly annoyed.

"Ever been told you're a pain in the ass?" he growled back, hiding the smile that kept trying to curve his lips. He shouldn't be doing this. She was scared and his prisoner, but it felt good to bandy words with her.

"A few times, as a matter of fact. Both times by George Blackwell himself. I guess I have that effect on jackasses."

"Jackass, 'eh? You sure like pushing the envelope, don't you?" He

snorted, spotting a rest stop ahead and starting to slow the truck. It was deserted with a large parking lot, which suited his purposes. He could pull to the back and let her out for a moment, let her stretch her legs. It wasn't for her benefit though. He was going numb from sitting in one position so long. He needed the break, too.

"Thank God," she said as she saw the rest stop coming up, grateful at least she'd have a chance to stretch her legs. She also hoped she might get the chance to get away from him. If her kidnapper would even allow her out. Not a problem though. If he didn't, she'd scream bloody murder and annoy him until he did. Or until he gagged her. "My ass is getting numb, and I can't feel my legs anymore."

There were two things at the top of her list. First was that she actually needed to pee, and she hoped there was a ladies room nearby. The second concern was to survey the place and see if she could escape from him. She had gone with a minimum of fight to avoid getting hurt but now, only an idiot would pass up a chance to secure her own release

She was gifted with photographic memory, and she took in as much of the landscape as she could to memorize the route they took. She had paid close attention to the personal security seminars that she had contracted for her employees earlier this year.

He didn't say anything as the truck pulled off the highway, crunching across the gravel of the parking lot in a wide arc. He pulled the vehicle to a stop right at the back, half concealed behind the rest stop buildings, and turned to her.

"Right. This is how we're going to do this, sweetheart." His hazel eyes were level, dangerously level, as he looked at her. Out of nowhere, a switchblade appeared in his hand.

For a moment, her heart stopped. This wasn't really a break but rather where he was going to kill her. He was going to kill her right here and bury her corpse in a shallow grave. The arguments really didn't make sense with the bigger picture that she was trying to put together earlier as fear overrode her logic.

"I'm going to cut these ties and let you out for a quick walk. You just remember that you might get a head start, but no one outruns a bullet.

*Comprendé?"*

Relief rushed through her, and she suppressed a shudder, but it didn't last for long, as she got angry again with herself. Trying to compensate for her rattled state of mind, she reverted to defense mechanisms and gave him a pitying look.

"Wow, that line's so lame it's beyond cliché," she drawled as she held out her bound wrists. "Which B movie did you get it from?"

The blade flashed out and in one swift movement sliced the plastic that held her wrists. He shrugged as he folded it and slipped it back in his pocket. Rollie didn't make the mistake of following it with her gaze. He had two weapons on him that she knew of. She would bet he carried more.

"Smart ass," he muttered as he shot her a look. "Just get out and walk."

Rollie rubbed her wrists and got out of the truck. It was still dark, but based on approximation since they left the lab, it was now nearing dawn. The thin lab coat over the strappy top, jeans, and Cracle Roxi Prada boots she wore was no match for the chill of the damp, September morning. She hugged herself to try and ward off the cold as she walked around, trying to get her blood running and bring the life back to her limbs. At the same time, she tried to survey the place for possible escape routes.

All the while, though, her bladder screamed at her to head to the restroom. She ignored it. She needed to get her plan set before she headed for the restroom because, once she got there, she needed to be ready to carry it out. It wasn't exactly lab tested, and she didn't like doing anything half-assed, but it was the best plan she could come up with at moment's notice.

"Hey! Are you keeping an imaginary leash on me, or can I take a bathroom break?"

He was leaning back on the hood of his truck, but his eyes hadn't left her for a second as she walked. Although the revolver she'd seen earlier was nowhere in sight, everything about him screamed awareness. She had no doubt he could have it in his hand and be pulling the trigger

within the blink of an eye.

He shrugged and pushed off the truck. "Come on, then."

She headed for the public restroom, a good distance away from the truck, with him following close behind. She was well aware of every measured step he took and knew he was ready in case she bolted. He had the advantage of longer legs, and she suspected that he was in better physical shape than she was. But even so, the fact remained that she wasn't going to be running off with a full bladder. First things first.

He followed her into the restroom, checking out the stalls before he let her into one. "Be quick." He stood back and motioned her toward the nearest one. It was the only one without a window, not that the window would have done her any good. Tiny, with steel-laced security glass, they looked very much as if they'd been painted into position years ago. "Don't lock the door," he added, turning away.

Damn it! He was thorough and cautious; she had to give him that. She had prayed there was a window, but not to worry, she had another plan. She just hoped he wouldn't catch on to it before she could complete it. "You're going to stand right there while I do my thing?" she asked, outraged. "What about a little privacy?"

"I'm a big boy. You haven't got anything I haven't seen countless times before," he said in a bored tone, leaning against the opposite wall just out of her line of sight.

"Well, you're not seeing *mine*. Not if I've got something to say about it," she muttered as she got into the stall and slammed the door behind her. As she went about her business, she brought the scenario in her head into play.

The restroom was small, and he stood right outside the cubicle. Luckily for her, though, there was no way he could see her feet under the door, which was critical if she was going to pull this off. Quickly and quietly concluding her business, she took off her coat, careful that she didn't rustle the fabric too much, and removed her ID. The badge went behind the bowl and under the tank where it was sure to be found by a janitor. At the least, it would help the cops know that she'd been here.

Next, she removed the tank cover, biting her lip as the lid scraped

against the tank, and fiddled with the floater and flush cap. A few mechanical adjustments and she slid the cover back into place. Then she was ready. Flexing her fingers and stretching her arms, she hoped to God that, with what she was about to do, those ballet lessons would pay off.

Bloody hell, what sort of bladder capacity did this woman have? Day leaned against the wall, thumbs looped loosely in his jeans pockets, and waited for her to finish. The flush of the toilet went on and on, a steady stream instead of an actual flush. What was she doing? Holding the handle down to cover the sound of her actually pissing or something?

He shook his head, surprised at her being shy over something like that when she'd been so ballsy about everything else. Women. He'd never understand them. He waited another minute, just to be on the safe side, and then cleared his throat. "You done in there?"

There was silence. Apart from the flushing, of course.

"Gavilan? Don't tell me you're asleep on there," he warned, making sure his boots made a noise against the tiles to warn her he was near the door. He pushed it open to reveal...nothing. The cubicle was empty.

"Fucking *hell!*" He slammed his hand against the door. She must have done something to the toilet to cover her escape. "I'm gonna throttle that woman!" He heard her as she made it through the door. Turning on his heel, he headed after her with a bellow of fury. Despite his earlier threats, he didn't go for his gun as he rounded the door, using a hand wrapped around the frame to spin himself through it and out into the night air.

She was just ahead of him, trying to run in those ridiculously high boots. Day grinned. She might have a head start on him, but running wasn't one of her talents. Even with the all-out panic he could read in every line of her body, she had no chance, not against him.

He set off after her, the powerful muscles in his legs driving him forward in a flat sprint. Even though he'd threatened to shoot her, he had no intention of it. Not when he could run her down. Just ahead of him, she squealed; a soft exclamation of denial, fear, frustration.

She tried to turn and evade his grasp, but he already had her. His

hands descended on her shoulders just as they reached the truck. With two deft movements, he twisted her arm into a lock, slammed her hard into the hood of the truck, and pinned her there.

"Stupid move," he told her, using his foot to kick her ankles apart as he pressed her into the cool metal.

"At least I tried!" she said in her defense, as if it made any difference. "I'm not going to take this lying down! If you thought that, then you really are an idiot!" She tried to struggle, but he kept the pressure of his body against hers, pinning her against the hood of the truck.

He chuckled, his breath fanning over her neck, and stirring the hair lying across it. "You seem to be lying down right now."

He felt her shiver underneath him, and she was quiet for a while before she started squirming to try and get out of his grip. "That's crude even for you, you douche."

He tightened the grip on her arm until she stopped moving around, then lifted up and flipped her over easily. Despite the sass and attitude that somehow made her seem bigger than she was, she was a slender, petite little thing. Especially when compared to him. Roughly, he shoved her thighs apart, wedged his hips between them, and bracketed her head with his hands. It was a risk, letting her hands go. She could always try for his gun. But, fast as she might be, Day knew he was faster. Now, instead of a kidnapper/ victim combo, they looked like lovers to anyone who might catch a glimpse of them from the highway.

He glared at her, filled with determination and anger. He clenched his jaw. "I've not even *started* on crude yet, sweetheart. You want to try for it?"

Her hands went up to his chest, and she tried to push him away. "You're not the first sleaze ball who tried to act funny with me," she ground out, anger and frustration emanating from her. "Keep this up, and you'll get a first-hand look of what I did to him when he tried to be a filthy pig."

Day shifted his hips and lifted up a little, feeling like the creep she'd called him. He'd never, *never* needed to threaten a woman like this

to get her to cooperate. Honey was always so much easier to use than threats. Trouble was, honey didn't come easily to him. Especially when all his instincts told him she wasn't indifferent to him. "Methinks the lady doth protest too loudly," he taunted softly.

"In your dreams, douche bag!" she snapped back. "Get the hell off of me!" She tried pushing him again, but her efforts weren't as whole-hearted as before.

His chuckle was mocking as he lifted away from her slightly. "You have *no* clue what my dreams are like." Gently, he swept a finger along her cheekbone. "Really no clue at all..."

### **Chapter Three**

The rest of the journey to the cabin passed quickly, a strained silence reigning supreme in the small cab of the battered truck. After their little incident, Rollie didn't look at him at all. She'd curled up under his jacket as though it were some sort of armor. Armor to keep him away.

She needn't have bothered. Day kept his attention solely on the road, his gaze fixed unwaveringly on the road stretching out in front of them. The scene at the rest stop had rocked him. He'd never felt such instant lust, such need, for a woman. Not in all his years. The desire to pull her into his arms and silence her incessant nagging with a kiss, keeping that sassy mouth occupied in far more interesting ways than sniping at him, had totally blindsided him.

His jaw worked. He was used to being the one in control, the one calling the shots—even over his own body. Especially over his own body. When in the service, he'd never joined in the trips into whatever town they were stationed near to pick up women. He'd always waited for his leave, getting far away from it all and, if necessary, paying for his women. Generally, that hadn't been necessary. All he had to do was sit in a bar long enough, and he could count on being approached.

He lifted a hand and rubbed the stubble forming over his jaw. He'd been told he was good looking, fit...and that was before he took his shirt off and they copped a load of the scars scattered over his torso.

Chicks seemed to dig scars, and he had a lot. Scars that told a tale of life in the darker areas of military service and beyond, places that didn't

really bear thinking about. Places the government would never admit to sending soldiers to. He snorted. *Plausible deniability*. It was a wonderful phrase used to cover all sorts of dodgy activities.

The turn for the cabin came into view, and within a few seconds, they were turning off the road. Not a moment too soon for Day. The sky had been gradually getting lighter, and he knew he had to get them off the road and out of sight before dawn broke.

They were almost home free. The thick branches overhead blotted out the paling sky as he entered the wood surrounding the cabin. Situated halfway up the hill and enclosed by dense forest, it was the perfect place to hunker down for a while. As they pulled up, he noted that she hadn't moved other than a slight raise of her head to see around the bend. Otherwise, she kept her gaze away from him and stayed firmly planted on the other side of the cab. Her silence was a wall that made approaching her seem like a delicate situation.

He'd tied her hands again with a new set of flex cuffs. Normally, after a mark tried to get away, binding and gagging would have been called for. But, aside from some mandatory resistance when he was cuffing her hands, she obliged him all the way. As if she were looking forward to getting the whole thing over with.

Grimly, Day bit down the guilt that surged through him for frightening her. Where the hell had that come from? She was a job, nothing more. He'd done a hell of a lot worse in his time. She was getting the VIP treatment by comparison.

"We're here," he grunted, quite unnecessarily as he'd just shut the engine off.

She shrugged but said nothing. Opening the door, she stepped out of the warm enclosure of the truck, shivering slightly as the morning cold hit her full on. That strappy top would have been better left for sleepwear than actual work clothes.

"Come on. Last thing I want is you catching a cold and then I'll have to look after you for days." He rounded the truck and looped a hand under her upper arm. As he did, he gazed around them, checking the woods.

"Let's get inside," he murmured, urging her forward, his attention still on the forest that surrounded them.

"Yeah, good idea. I'm pretty sure my germs are lethal to single-celled organisms like you," she retorted, but bit the end off abruptly. Despite the fact that he'd bound her, she was still a handful, and as he led her forward, she shoved her arm back, trying to make him release her, perhaps intending to walk by herself. With his hand where it was, though, she ended up pressing the side of her breast into his knuckles instead. She seemed to shiver at the contact and quickly recoiled away from him. "Sorry," she mumbled. "I can walk by myself, thank you."

"So I see." He let go and motioned for her to precede him, then had to hide a smirk as her stiletto heels got mired in the soft earth of the clearing in front of the cabin. Day just shook his head. Bloody women. They'd cut their damn noses off to spite their faces.

She tried to navigate through the soft soil with the impractical shoes, but eventually she sighed in resignation. She was only ruining an expensive-looking pair of boots and risking falling flat on her ass. Already she'd almost lost her balance twice.

Day waited, adopting a bored look as he crossed his arms. "Mind picking it up a little here, toots? I'd like to get inside before sunrise."

Rollie loved anything with high heels. Growing up in the rough environment she had, she came off tomboyish. Heels gave her a sense of femininity, not to mention wearing them did great things to her posture and made her feel sexy. She wore them so often she was used to doing all sorts of activities in them. However, had she known she would be kidnapped today, she would have opted to wear sneakers, or army boots she could have stashed a knife in. Instead, she was digging herself into soft soil as the heels sank all the way, ruining a fabulous and very expensive pair of Pradas.

She'd rather eat dirt than admit defeat to this Neanderthal, though. He annoyed her—a lot—which was rare since she usually got along so well with everyone. Of course, he was her kidnapper, and she was supposed to hate him, but every time he said something, she ground her

teeth. And every time he touched her, she wanted to butt him in the head. She'd take these reactions more seriously if she didn't also shiver with every touch. Damn it! She hadn't been around any men for the longest time, especially attractive ones built the way he was, and now she was paying for it. He was sexy in that brooding, bad-boy way, and from the contact earlier, the rock-hard muscles under his clothes weren't gym-sculpted designer muscles. No, this bad boy had lived rough, and it showed.

If only he didn't look so good, she might not react like the virginal geek she used to be. She was now a grown woman, and this man wasn't her friend, he was an enemy. Her captor.

A few steps more and she made it to the rickety front step and clomped up the stairs with a proud bearing.

He followed a step or two behind. Despite being larger than she was, his footfalls were almost noiseless. Rollie shivered. It was another indication that this man wasn't quite what she expected. He looked like a thug for sure, the sort into loud music and working out with weights in front of a mirror. But it was as if he wore a mask; the expression in his eyes slipped at times and revealed something altogether colder underneath. Even now, he wasn't looking at her, not properly. Oh, she had no doubt he was tracking her every movement, but his attention was on the woods surrounding them, which allowed her a moment to study him.

Physically, there were no other words to describe him other than *hunk* and other versions of the same. Despite the fact she didn't like him right now, she couldn't deny he was attractive. His face seemed carved from rock, and he had a rugged appeal that made him undeniably masculine. Had he smiled for reasons other than scorning or threatening her, the dimples that appeared every time he did would have made him adorably cute. Coupled with a body like that and the twinkle in his warm, hazel eyes, there was no way he couldn't know what effect he had on women.

Rollie, who hadn't had an intimate relationship in a while, wasn't faring so well when it came to trying to remember that this man wasn't a

friend but the enemy. She should be afraid of him and thinking of escape instead of wondering how it would have felt if he had kissed her when he had her pinned against the hood. She actually found herself hoping he'd kiss her every time he hovered over her, and was even more shocked at the pang of disappointment when he backed away.

This was pathetic, even for her.

His gaze finished its sweep of the clearing, and he shook his head slightly, as though bothered by something. Then he caught her looking at him. For a spilt second, his expression mirrored surprise, and then the mask slotted into place again as though he'd reminded himself who and what she was. A job. His captive.

"Inside." He unlocked the door with a quick movement, pushing it open and motioning her through it past him. The gap wasn't wide, but she didn't think his intention was to make her squeeze past him so he could get some sort of lecherous thrill out of it. No, his attention was on the surroundings again, a thoughtful look in his eyes.

He followed her inside, throwing the bolt and locking it after them. He slipped the key into the pocket of his jeans. "Make yourself comfortable," he said, motioning toward a tattered sofa against one wall as he strode past her. He flicked on the TV as he passed and headed for the kitchen.

"Not exactly the Ritz Carlton, but then again, this is what they use for the hideouts in those B movie action flicks, don't they?"

He'd been distracted by the surroundings...was he expecting someone to arrive? Were they being watched? His employer perhaps, or more lackeys?

The thought of more coming made her unsettled. Men who usually went into this line of work weren't very chivalrous, were they? The man who had kidnapped her had intimated that he wasn't beneath doing base things to her, but somehow she could tell it wasn't in his nature to do so.

She couldn't say the same for his accomplices though. If he had any. The only defense she had right now was her wits, and she had to stay calm and alert. Staying a smartass was risky, but she needed to look tough, otherwise it would be easy for him or his buddies to have their

way with her. And being a smartass also made *her* believe she was tough, which was good. Because right now, her sass was the only thing stopping her from freaking out.

Who would want her “out of the way,” as he had said? Not many people knew that she was the real brains behind Gavilan Tech. He’d mentioned a conference. Did he mean the energy summit in Geneva? Was this about the photon reactor? Who would have known other than someone in her own company...? She grimaced. Did she have a mole in her research team?

“Hey,” she called to him in the kitchen. “Since you got me locked in here, are these still necessary?” She indicated the flex cuffs.

He turned around to lean back against the counter with his hands spread on either side of his hips. “That depends. You going to give me any more trouble?”

“That depends. Are you really going to let me go soon?”

His lips quirked as though he fought a smile. “Sassy little thing, aren’t you? Come here.” He spoke the order softly, but it was an order nonetheless. His gaze was firm and unyielding.

He was being intent, and despite her sass, she didn’t want to defy him, so she did as he said. “Can’t help it. I usually am a pain in the ass, especially if someone kidnaps me then sticks me in a pad that looks like Grizzly Adams lived in it for a while.” She approached him, extending her bound wrists forward so he could cut the flex cuffs off.

He hooked a finger under the cuffs, drawing her closer slowly. As he watched her, the expression in his eyes warmed up. His grip on the cuffs tightened as she resisted a little.

“You want the cuffs off?” he asked, his voice low. “Well, I want something in return.”

She shivered involuntarily at the look in his eyes. Something had changed, and she knew he was up to something devious. She tugged at his hold on the plastic ties that bound her wrists. “Apart from my credit cards, I only have twenty-six dollars in my wallet, so I’m afraid I can’t help you there champ. Though, if you take me to town, I guess I can withdraw some cash at the bank.” She knew exactly what he wanted, but

she couldn't help playing a dangerous game with her captor.

In an isolated place. In the mountains. All alone.

He tilted his head slightly, the single finger hold he had on her cuffs easily breakable. "Oh, come on. You're not that dense. You know I'm not interested in money." His low voice was like a caress that slid along her spine, stroking the skin with soft fingers. "If I was, I'd have taken the better rate and just killed you."

Heat had spread through her body the second she saw the change, and him turning up the sexual mega wattage was burning her up. Oh, she knew what he was about, but she was *so* not going there. If he had been someone else, she'd probably be hitting on him the second she saw him. But she wouldn't even consider it with the guy who had kidnapped her. A very...sexy...kidnapper.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Well, what was I supposed to think? It can't be what you're trying to prove, because I don't think you're man enough for me, bucko."

*Liar, liar. Pants on fire.*

His eyes darkened, one eyebrow arching. "Is that so?" The pressure on her cuffs increased, pulling her a little nearer.

He only had one finger on the plastic ties, his hold easily broken if she pulled her hands away. But it wasn't the ties that bound her now. It was the way his eyes looked into hers that held her attention. She was finding it hard to draw a deep breath, and her heart pounded so hard she was afraid he could hear it. What was it about this man and her?

"Oh, you think you're so smooth, don't you? *'Is that so?'* You think that makes you sound sexy? With the eyes and everything? Let me tell you, it doesn't. Not one bit. And I'm not attracted to you."

He chuckled, but it wasn't amusement heating his eyes. It was something altogether darker, something that took her breath away. "Prove it then. One kiss, and I'll free your wrists."

"Wow, you think I'm so easy, don't you?" And yet, as she used up the last vestiges of her will to resist, she found her gaze drifting toward his well-shaped mouth and wondering again what would it be like to kiss him. "Okay, fine. I'll do it. I might get some unknown STD from you and

I'll need to gargle with bleach later, but I'm only doing this to prove to you I'm too hot for you to handle."

Defiant to the end, she broke the one finger hold he had on her restraints and looped her bound wrists around his neck. Despite the heels, he was tall enough that she had to stand on tiptoe to pull him down by the neck and press her lips to his.

If Rollie thought she was in control of this, then she soon found out differently. As soon as her lips touched his, he took control, his hands sliding around her waist to pull her closer. His lips, warm and firm, slid along hers, seeking and demanding a response.

She knew she was doomed the moment she gave in, the moment her lips touched his. Despite the danger that shrouded him, there was something about him she couldn't resist. God help her, she liked kissing him. Ardent, demanding, and thorough. He kissed like a dream, and she was no match for him as she gave herself to the kiss completely. Needing to get closer to him, she pressed her body against his and moaned her surrender into his mouth.

His hand slid up her back, cupping the nape of her neck and holding her in place so he could deepen the kiss. His tongue brushed out, flicking the underside of her upper lip as though he were asking permission, wanting access. Although he was a large man, making her feel petite and feminine, and he'd kidnapped her in the first place, in his arms, kissing him, she forgot all about their current situation.

The teasing continued, and she finally let him in, letting him have free access to her mouth as she teased his tongue with hers, inviting him to play. She was dizzy with arousal and didn't see him as her kidnapper anymore but a captor in another respect. She didn't think she'd be able to deny anything he requested of her right then. She was a smart woman, but in his arms with him kissing her like this, she didn't want to rationalize anything. She just wanted to feel.

He groaned, turning them both so she was against the counter, then boosted her up to sit on it. A shiver ran through his big body when she touched his tongue with hers.

This was unbridled lust. An honest reaction. A woman who knew

what she wanted and how she wanted it. She moaned as she felt him hard against the softest part of her; the contact sending sparks through her body and exploding through every nerve she had. Greedy for more contact, she ground herself against his hardness and almost fell limp in his arms with the blissful sensation.

He kissed along her jaw, the softest of tugs on her hair pulling her head back and revealing the softness of her throat to him. She whimpered as he found the sensitive spot under her ear, her body nearly melting into a puddle and slithering off the counter. Then he stopped, going still.

Rollie took a few more moments to realize he had stopped abruptly. Dazed with arousal, she needed a second to see he'd been distracted by something on the TV, and she stopped to listen as well.

"...was fatally wounded in a shooting earlier today. GTC spokesperson Bryan Westwood said to media during a press conference that prior to the shooting, Doctor Gavilan was scheduled to make an appearance at the Geneva Energy Summit next week ..."

Then, as she heard more, she quickly disengaged from him and ran to see more of the newscast.

"No!" she cried out as she saw her double, her friend Marie Deline, carried by paramedics to an awaiting ambulance.

"...died a few hours later while undergoing surgery after being shot several times at close range. Authorities have yet to determine the motives for the horrific shooting and are currently looking for witnesses to shed light on the incident. However, given the lack of forensic evidence, police are having difficulty in proceeding with the investigation..."

She was frozen on the spot as she stared at the screen, tears streaming down in earnest. She couldn't believe that she was seeing this. Hearing this. Marie was dead? It couldn't be...

Her captor's arms wrapped around her, holding her tight as she tried to wriggle free, pain and disbelief surging through her.

He pulled the switchblade from his pocket and cut through the plastic of her cuffs like a hot knife through butter. He left the cuffs on the floor where they fell. "We have to leave. Now."

As soon as her hands were free, she came swinging at him. The

arousal she'd felt turned into rage and then fury as she remembered how easily she fell victim to his charms.

"You sonofabitch!" she screamed through her tears as she swung one punch after the other, most missing by a mile. "You already had me! Why did she have to die too?"

"Whoa! Whoa! It wasn't me!" He put his hands up to defend himself and easily caught her flailing fists. A quick move, and he spun her around, trapping her with her own folded arms, her back to his chest.

"No, it wasn't you, but you sure as hell are part of it!" she snarled as she struggled to get loose. The arm lock he had her in was effective and painful, but she ignored the pain and kept struggling, all she wanted to do was land a good punch on his face. Marie's death, her ordeal, the kiss...it was all too much.

She broke down and cried. "Why?" she wailed. "She wasn't a threat to anyone. She didn't know anything. Oh my God. It was all me. It was my fault," she said, realizing the implications. "She died because of me."

She'd sagged against him, her body racked with sobs. Forcing her to stand upright, he turned her around and slid gentle fingers under her chin to make her look up at him.

"Rollie, look at me. I had nothing to do with that, I promise you," he said, his voice urgent. "I need you to pull yourself together." He looked up, sharp gaze narrowing on the window. "We have company, and I don't think they're here to borrow a cup of sugar."

It took Rollie a few more seconds to snap out of it and understand what he was saying. An experienced soldier she wasn't. She hadn't noticed anything wrong. However, the self-preservation programming innate in every human kicked in, and she recognized the tension in his body.

But why should she trust him? The company he was referring to could be the police or the FBI coming to her rescue.

Before she could say or do anything else, the windows in the far wall exploded, sending glass and wooden splinters flying all over the place.

## **Chapter Four**

Rollie's captor wrapped her into his arms, shielding her with his larger body. The sound of the explosion had barely finished, and he was moving. The black-swathed figures that clambered through the ruined windows were obviously not friendly as small red dots and faint dancing beams pierced the dust in the room. They settled on her shoulder for a second, shocking her into motionlessness, before he shoved her out the way, kicking the fridge door open as meager cover for her.

Within a heartbeat, his weapon was in his hand. He pulled the trigger, the gun seeming like an extension of his being. Methodically, he cut them down before the dust could fully clear, then he turned to her where she crouched behind the refrigerator door.

He spun the gun in his hand and offered it to her grip first from his open hand. "I presume they at least put you through basic range drill?"

Rollie was genuinely shocked, even more than she had been by the flash grenades. He was giving her his weapon? And how the hell did he know she knew how to shoot? The men he had killed wore civvies and looked meaner than the offensive line of a losing football team. They obviously weren't cops or FBI. These guys were killers.

This wasn't the time to contemplate. Not asking any more questions, she took the gun and positioned herself behind one of the thick oak pillars running down the center of the cabin as she'd been taught.

Once in a while, when she didn't think of engineering or physics, she'd contemplate her personal philosophy. Would she be able to take a

life even if her own was on the line? If the time came, would she be able to stab a man with a knife or shoot one with a gun? She didn't come up with any clear answers then. But as the front door caved in and a mean-looking ogre with an M16 started shooting the second he stepped past the threshold, she got her answer.

One shot. Then another. And another. It all seemed to go in slow motion. She could see the expression on his face as the bullets struck him first in the arm, then in the chest. She didn't think she'd ever seen such a sickening expression of pain and torment, and a realization that one's life was coming to an end. It seemed to go on forever as the man fell to the ground, his assault rifle still firing in his hands as his death grip held onto the trigger. Within seconds, the magazine had fired its last round.

She could shoot. Like, seriously shoot. Surprise held Day spellbound for a second or two, but then his training kicked in. He scooped the nearest weapon up, dropped from a rapidly cooling hand, and checked the magazine. Full. He grunted as he slapped it back into place.

"Bag, under the counter next to you," he ordered her, keeping his voice brisk. He didn't spare the bodies on the floor another glance as he approached the door carefully to check outside. "And ditch the white top. You'll stick out like a sore thumb out there."

At first she nodded dumbly at his command, picking up the bag as she quickly followed him, but his next words made her stop in her tracks.

"You want me to do *what*?" she asked incredulously. "I don't want go topless out there, and this isn't the time to be pulling this sort of crap, you horny bastard!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Day closed his eyes for a second, leaning his head back against the wall. He lifted his head up and looked at her sharply. "Look, you daft female, these guys aren't it. There's going to be more of them out there, and chances are they've got the road covered. So we're going to have to go across country, through woodland. You go out there wearing that and you may as well wave a damn flag saying, 'come get me!'"

She opened her mouth then snapped it closed as if she couldn't find

a retort. Instead, she turned to rummage through a closet and pulled on a dark jacket. It was too big for her, but it would do the job well. She zipped it up to her neck and rolled the sleeves twice. Once again he realized just how much bigger he was than her.

"Does this work?" she grumbled like a petulant child seeking approval.

"Better," he rumbled, sparing her another short glance before turning his attention back to the scene outside. All was quiet, but he knew better than to rely on that. Even now, they were probably moving into position for a second assault. It didn't help that she looked cute as all hell wearing his jacket. Like a kid playing dress-up.

A kid with curves in all the right places.

He clamped down on that thought. He needed all his wits about him. "How fast can you run in those things?" He flicked a glance down at her feet, clad in the ridiculously heeled boots. She could roll the sleeves up on his jacket and make fit, but footwear was a different matter.

"But these are Prada!" she protested, but obviously relenting to practicality, she sat down and discarded the boots. Besides, they looked hopelessly ruined from their trekking earlier and her attempt to escape.

"You wouldn't happen to have size six and a half boots around here somewhere would you?" she asked him, hope in her tone.

He shook his head. "Not into women's fashion. You'll have to go as you are. When I say three, you hit the ground running and don't stop. You got me? See that fallen log? Head for that and into the woods. Keep going. I'll catch up."

Rollie shook her head. She'd have to go barefoot, which would be hell but a whole lot better than trekking in wilderness with high heels. Breaking an ankle because of a stiletto wasn't exactly a good thing while trying to get away from a bunch of killers. "What if they're waiting for us out there?" she asked, hesitating.

A muscle in his jaw jumped, his gaze scanning the surroundings again. Not idly, she realized, but there seemed to be a specific pattern to it. As though he was trying to catch movement out the corner of his eye.

"They will be. You let me deal with that. You keep running, and if

anyone tries to stop you, you shoot them. Understand?" he asked, holding his hand out for the backpack.

She had to trust him. She had no other choice. She handed over the backpack. After a deep breath, silent words of self-motivation, and a quiet prayer heavenward, she positioned herself by the door and calculated the time it would take her to reach the log and then disappear into the woods.

She'd gone camping before, so she wasn't a stranger to the wilderness. But then again, she hadn't been on the run from ruthless ogres trying their best to kill her. And right now, the very forest she was about to head was most likely teeming with a bunch of them.

He pulled the backpack over his shoulder and switched the rifle from one hand to the other in a motion that spoke of long practice. Finally, he looked at her. "Okay, on three. One...two...three!"

He burst out of the ruined doorway, using his bigger body to shield her.

"Go!" he bellowed as bullets splintered the wooden wall that they'd been standing against seconds before. She cringed at the sound of the gunfire but instinct, adrenaline, and years upon years of conditioning from her workouts got her to the log faster than she thought she could. Staying low, she was very aware that her captor-turned-bodyguard seemed to have gone through this before. For a moment, she felt sorry for him, while at the same time she felt a sense of admiration. How could someone consider this sort of life as a normal existence?

While he attacked their unseen enemy, she took the time to gather her courage again. After a few more breaths and some moments of hesitation, she ducked low and ran as fast as she could into the forest. Rocks and twigs prodded her soles. It would have been painful, but she couldn't feel them anymore. Her blood seemed had been replaced by adrenaline.

He caught up with her what seemed like hours later, the woods behind them falling silent. "Keep moving," he ordered, his hand sliding under her arm to hurry her along the path. "That's put them down for a while, but I don't think I got the lot."

"Looks like your friends were trying to tell you that your employer

doesn't like you," said Rollie as she moved as fast as she could while watching her step.

"If one of my *friends* wanted me dead, I'd be dead, and so would you," he told her bluntly. "No, far more likely they found something out that means they want you dead now, not just disappeared for a while. Keep moving." He motioned her on when she started to slow down.

"Who would want me dead?" she asked in disbelief. "No one even knows me enough to hate me, and what could anyone possibly gain from wanting to kill me? Who sent you? Why does your boss want me kidnapped and then killed?"

"I'm a subcontractor honey. I took on the kidnap job. It's possible they then sourced someone for a hit."

She would have pointed out to him that he didn't answer her question, but decided to shut up. She could always grill him later. Save for the chirping of crickets and the occasional hoots from owls, it was pretty quiet, and she was smart enough to know that it was advisable not to attract attention when trying to hide from someone.

Every now and then, she would bite off a curse or recoil as she stepped on something sharp. The forest floor wasn't too kind to her pampered feet, and as soon as they got to civilization, the first thing she'd get was a decent pair of sneakers. The blood roared in her head and over the deafening silence. She felt like every beat of her rapid heart was being broadcast all over the forest like a drummer with a timpani. The air was cold, and if it hadn't been for his jacket, she would have frozen to death. The solid steel pistol in her hand felt heavy but for some reason she couldn't—wouldn't—let go of it.

She knew that the fact that she killed a man just a while earlier would come to haunt her, and she dreaded it.

They were moving at a fast pace now but Day wasn't unaware of her little winces each time she stepped on something. And for some reason, he felt guilty each time she did, as though it were his fault she'd worn such bloody unsuitable shoes and had to take them off. He put his hand on her arm to stop her as they reached a kink in the path, sinking into a kneeling position out of habit as he listened to the sounds of the

forest around them.

After long seconds, he nodded. "I've got a truck hidden in an outbuilding up ahead," he said, his voice a mere whisper as he looked at her. She looked scared to death, and he attempted a smile. "We'll get out of this. I promise."

What made him say that, and give that assurance, he didn't know. He didn't do nice. It just wasn't in him. So why now?

She was panting, and her teeth were chattering. She was scared, and he recognized the signs of shock setting in. He was reasonably sure they were being followed, silently stalked. As soon as someone got a bead on them, they were toast. He wasn't naïve enough to believe his contract with his employers would protect him.

There had been no way they were getting to her in the labs, so they'd needed an extraction specialist. Him. No doubt, they'd hired him to get her out of the labs, and they'd planned this all along. He hissed in annoyance with himself for not spotting it as he carried on down the path, his hand holding hers firmly. Games within games. There was nothing he hated more than games.

He paused for an instant as the conditions underfoot deteriorated. Last night's rain had turned the path to mud. Without a word, he turned and swung her into his arms. She stifled a gasp as he clomped through the muck at a speed that defied the fact he was carrying a full-grown woman in his arms with little effort.

She looked down at the mud, then back at his face. "I'm making you sink," she whispered as she kept glancing behind them.

He grimaced as the water seeped over the top of his boots. "Don't argue, or I might decide it's a bad idea and drop you in the middle of all this," he warned, although he wouldn't do it. Just like he wasn't going to leave her here and run, even though it would save his own ass. They wanted her, not him.

But he wasn't going to let that happen. The job had been to kidnap her and return her to civilization after the conference, not cold-blooded murder. Besides, even if he did cut and run, he knew too much. They wouldn't stop looking for him, and he didn't much fancy hiding out

somewhere in the back end of beyond for the rest of his life to avoid them.

"I'll survive. Been in worse conditions." He dropped her lightly onto her feet as the path cleared up, urging her into a run ahead of him. The dilapidated outbuilding was in sight just up ahead. "Just a little farther, and we're out of here."

She ran as soon as she saw the building. The next stop was the truck and then back to civilization. But running toward the door, she didn't see the burly goon hiding in the shadows behind a tree until he moved. In slow motion, he watched the butt of the rifle headed right for her face. She instinctively moved her arms up to protect herself, but it was too late, and the rifle struck her temple with a muffled thud.

Day swore viciously as she dropped like a rag doll. They must have cased the area and found his equipment stashes. He'd set the area up in case he needed to leave quickly. In addition to this one, there were four other locations with everything from a simple rucksack of equipment right up to one with a dirt bike. Obviously, they'd decided to hedge their bets and put a goon here in case he and Rollie managed to evade the main group.

Clever, but not clever enough. Day moved like lightening, getting inside the guy's reach in an instant. He twisted, his fist contacting the goon's jaw in a vicious uppercut that had him staggering. Day didn't give him time to recover, throwing a heavy right hook. It connected with a meaty crunch, then the hard blade of Day's elbow smashed into the same spot. The goon dropped, groaning incoherently.

Day picked up Rollie's SIG, which was loose in her hand, and pointed it at the semi-conscious man. He should shoot. Never leave an enemy behind you. Something stopped him, though.

"Gah!" Disgusted with himself, he tucked the pistol into the back of his jeans and bent down to pick Rollie up.

It took only minutes to bundle the unconscious woman into the passenger seat of the truck hidden in the dilapidated shed, and then Day was gunning the engine, crashing through the rotten main doors, and throwing the truck down the dirt trail as fast as he could.

Shots rang out behind them, but he kept going, watching the

gauges on his dashboard. Last thing he needed was for a bullet to have nicked the gas line or worse, a brake line. But everything seemed to be in working order, and before long, he was sliding the truck out sideways onto the highway.

Two hours later, he was still on the road, constantly scanning the view in his mirror. No one appeared to be following them. He sighed and slowed a little, rubbing the back of his neck in exhaustion. They were going to need to stop for gas soon, and he needed to check Rollie out.

His gaze slid sideways, running over her profile as she lay in the passenger seat. She had stirred a couple of times, and her breathing was nice and regular, so he didn't think she was badly injured. A quick examination of the rapidly darkening bruise had alleviated some of Day's concerns. Probably just a concussion. Ordinarily, he'd have taken her to a hospital, but if their pursuers caught up with them, a concussion would be the least of her worries.

His eyes watered, burning with tiredness as he tried to blink them clear. Okay, forget the gas; he needed to stop for a while. Just a power nap. Fifteen minutes, tops, and he'd be good to go. Exhaustion pulled at every muscle in his body as he turned the battered truck off the road at the next rest stop, heading to park up behind the service buildings so he could shut his eyes for a few minutes.

## Chapter Five

There was someone in the room with him, his sleep muffled senses told him. Someone not only in the room but also close to him. Well within striking range. His eyes opened on the dimly lit room, a frown already forming on his face. He never slept with a light on, preferring the sanctity of darkness. And that wasn't all that was wrong. His gaze collided with that of the woman standing at the side of the bed, looking down at him.

He swallowed, struggling to sit up. Black lingerie. The *raciest* black lingerie he'd ever seen. Breasts barely contained in black lace, threatening to burst free with every breath, coupled with stockings, garters, and the tiniest scrap of lace at the vee of her thighs.

His eyes widened. He was unable to stop his gaze as it traveled down mile-long legs encased in black silk. And stilettos. He groaned. Killer stilettos that did things to her legs that were—had to be—illegal. Arousal, instant and demanding, hit him like a truck at mach one, his body at instant attention.

Rich brown hair shone under the soft lighting of the room, curling in waves across her silky shoulders. Hair his hands just itched to bury themselves in, but tightened on the sheets instead. The soft chocolate tresses shrouded one side of her face in a manner that made her seem more mysterious and bewitching. Her skin seemed to glow and looked smoother and softer than satin pillows. Her makeup was subtle but brought out her best features, bringing attention to her eyes. Always a reflection of intelligence and wit, they now sparkled with a dangerous,

sensual intent.

Her lips, normally twisted in a smirk or a frown, were now full and pouty, accented by the dark scarlet lipstick, parted slightly with every breath she took. A subtle half smile had him doing a double take to make sure she was really smiling, or if he was imagining things. The perfume she wore was musky and dark, utterly sensual and feminine in all aspects, perfect for how she looked tonight.

All in all, the woman that was looking down at Day like a jungle cat eyeing a piece of meat was far from the smart talking, rational, brilliant scientist Day knew. No, he was face-to-face with a sex goddess.

She reached over and slowly dragged a fingernail down his chest, scraping his skin lightly, leaving a trail of heat and cold in its wake.

"Hi." Her voice was low and husky, oozing sex. That simple greeting that had stood the test of time and had never been considered sexy, now made him think semi-obscene thoughts.

Torment, fascination and deep, dark need coursed through him as she reached down again. Stunned, he watched her hand, shaking his head slightly. He didn't dare move. Was this for real? Where had the shrew-like scientist gone? Hell, she was hiding *that* body under the lab coat. His throat dried up as she trailed a fingernail over his chest again. He shuddered, goose flesh pimpling across his naked skin as she drew lazy circles on his chest.

His eyes snapped open as his hand moved like lightening to capture hers. "Don't...unless you're prepared for the consequences," he threatened, his voice husky with repressed desire.

The subtle half smile turned teasing and her eyes narrowed into a calculating gaze. She didn't say anything for a moment. In fact, she just looked at him, dragging her gaze up and down the length of his body. Her gaze connected with his again, and she tilted her head coyly to one side.

"What would those consequences be?" she asked him before she teasingly bit her lip.

Things weren't making sense, but Day ignored that fact, all his attention concentrated on her. "Tease," he told her, closing his eyes for a moment to try and get a hold of himself. This couldn't be happening. This

didn't happen to him. He looked at her again. Yep, still in the racy underwear, that sexy look in her eyes.

"I'm so going to hell." His thumb rubbed the inside of her wrist gently as he locked his eyes with hers, letting her read the need in them. She didn't pull away as he drew her closer, pulling her down toward him on the bed.

She went with him, slowly lowering herself to straddle his hips. Through the sheet, her moist softness cushioned his hardness.

"Mmm..." she moaned as she closed her eyes. "That feels good."

A shiver ran through his entire body, his eyes closing helplessly. His arms closed around her, across the back of her hips, holding her in place against him. "Don't...move," he ordered, his tone strangled as he snaked one hand up to bury in her hair.

She opened her eyes and looked down at him again. She ran her hands over his chest, her fingers going slowly over every bump and indentation as if memorizing it by feel. Then without warning, she leaned down and began a slow trail of soft, airy kisses from his chest to his neck. When she got there, she gave him a quick nip before whispering in his ear. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying right here...all night long."

He sat up with her in his lap, pulling her head back to expose the long line of her throat. "Good, because this is going to take a while," he promised, crushing her to him, his lips on the curve of her shoulder.

She arched her neck, offering herself to him. A symbol of vulnerability and submission.

She ran her fingers through his hair as the rest of her body aligned itself with his. Her knees dug deeper into the sheets, pressing herself more firmly against his impressive hardness. Her breasts pressed harder into the brick wall that was his chest. Their bodies were like two pieces of a puzzle, falling into place perfectly.

"I'm so glad to hear that," she murmured. "I like being...thorough."

He chuckled, the sound reverberating through his body to hers where she touched him. "Oh, I can be very thorough," he promised as he kissed a trail along the skin of her throat. He closed his eyes as he reached

her jaw, breathing her delicate scent in as need made his body tremble. Finally, he reached her lips, his hand sliding through her hair as he claimed her mouth.

His kisses were intense, like water breaking through a dam. He explored every inch of her mouth with his tongue, and she let him. She played with him with her own tongue and tried to catch it with her lips. Eventually, she managed and suckled on it sensuously, suggestively, as she moved her hands down his spine to the small of his back.

She laughed a little vixen laugh as she drew up for air. "I'll take that as a promise."

Then she kissed him, and this time she was the aggressor. She plunged her tongue deep into his mouth and wielded it like a weapon. Once in a while, she would nip his lips with a playful bite before again taking the role of the submissive and opening herself up to his sensual exploration.

Oh, Christ, he was in heaven! He chased her lips with his own, hands moving to cradle her head. With an arm across the back of her hips, he eased her down onto the bed. His powerful body covering hers, he kissed her with everything he had, his soul laid bare as he stroked the hair back from her face gently. For all his bluster and bravado, he hadn't seriously believed he had half a chance with her. She was too smart, too beautiful to look at an ex-soldier like him. But now that she'd fallen into his lap, literally, he wasn't letting her go. Not a hope in hell.

Now, as he turned gentler, her kisses turned from hot and torrid to slow and wet; each kiss driving strong emotions surrounded by a swirling cloud of passion and lust. Her touches explored and praised. Her moans were encouraging and needy. The look in her eyes when she opened them was adoring and pleading. She wanted him, and she was waiting for him.

Triumph, and an answering all-consuming need swept through him as his hand stroked, explored. Swept up her ribcage, his thumb stroking the curve at the underside of her breast. "Much as I like this, I think it needs to come off now, sweetheart," he murmured, reaching between her full breasts to play with the tiny clip that held the bra together.

He looked deep into her eyes as he traced its outline, easing a finger under the clasp. Then, after a torturously long moment, he pressed the clasp, and the fabric fell away.

Then he looked down at her body and was lost, the easy compliment that rose automatically drying up. "Hell... You're perfect," he murmured, mentally kicking himself. *Yeah, Day, real smooth. Do something before she kicks your ass out of bed!*

He lifted his hand, tracing the outline of her lips with a finger. His body tightened, hard and aching, as she nipped his finger, taking it into her mouth to suckle gently. He almost lost control and his train of thought there and then. Leaning down, he replaced his fingers with his lips, taking her mouth in a hard, controlling kiss, a perfect counterpoint as he smoothed his hand gently over the swell of her breast, his wet fingers rolling against her rapidly beading nipple.

She purred in need, moaning into his mouth as he began to play with her nipple. She clasped her hands on his sides and moved her knees up to press into his hips. Her legs stroked against his.

"You're a bad man," she managed between breaths against his lips.

He smiled, his fingers sliding down to flick the snap of her garters. His hand shook slightly as he did so, betraying that he was near to the edge of his control.

"I am," he whispered back between kisses. "And about to do very bad things to you." His hand smoothed over her legs, a knee between her thighs as he lifted himself over her. "You're beautiful." He stroked his hand up the inside of her thigh slowly enough that she could pull away if she wanted to.

She didn't. She shivered in pleasure and anticipation. She even arched her back and lifted her hips off the bed to get closer to him.

"You're special," she whispered back, and as his fingers got closer and closer to their goal, she closed her eyes. "Please..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rollie woke up slowly. The pain from the hit to her head flared up,

drowning her spinning world in a haze of red. She brought a hand to her forehead and winced from the tenderness of the bruise. That was going to leave a mark. She remembered now, and the pain and disorientation hit her even worse. She had been careless. Fear made her so, and the last thing she'd seen was the rifle butt.

When she'd gotten out of bed this morning, she hadn't been expecting to achieve a significant scientific breakthrough, a feat that would change the world hopefully for the better. But neither had she expected to be kidnapped, dragged through the woods, shot at by goons, or to lose her best friend, the woman she considered to be the closest thing she had to a mother.

What had she done wrong? What had she done to deserve this? All she wanted was to help change the world, to save mankind by saving the planet. Ever since she had been old enough to understand that if she wanted to survive in this world she had to fend for herself, she had tried to live as normally as she possibly could.

It hadn't been easy for a young girl, barely in her teens, who had to survive in the harsh reality of life on the streets. She had been tempted to follow the other street kids and live the life they did, but she didn't think the same way. She knew she'd end up just like them, either dead in a ditch with two bullets in the head or, given her looks, living the rest of her life as a crack whore.

So she used her smarts. By day, she'd put herself through school and got past the system by faking a pair of parents who didn't exist. By night, she worked the bars as a waitress, and when she was old enough and learned the trade, became a bartender. But then she graduated at the top of her class at MIT and, shortly after, everything was history.

But while she had succeeded in getting out of the gutter all by herself, she still envied the other kids at school. While they didn't receive awards, they had parents, families, and significant others who shared their joy with them while the poor, smart girl had to make an excuse that her parents were in an archaeological dig somewhere and couldn't make it.

Friends were all she had left. The ones she had made growing up

were either dead, dying, or in jail. Some of her college friends now had successful careers of their own, while some had become enemies when pride settled in. Boys, and then men, had tried to claim her heart, but seemed more tempted with her body, and then her money and fame. Nothing but shallow opportunists. In the end, there was only a handful of people that were truly there for her.

Marie had been the most steadfast. Rollie had wanted to believe she'd always be there for her, but now she, too, had been taken away. Just like everything and everyone else. She didn't realize that tears were streaming down her cheeks, not until she felt a drop fall onto her hand. She finally broke down, the tears falling in earnest.

Day woke with a start. Eyes unfocused for a moment, he looked up at the tattered roof lining of the truck. *Shit. It had been a dream!* He closed his eyes again, hoping beyond hope to be able to slide back into it, but a soft sound in the truck stopped him, brought him back to full wakefulness. It was the sound of someone...crying?

Opening his eyes again, he turned his head to see Rollie curled up in a small ball in the passenger seat, her shoulders heaving as she sobbed. Deep, heart-rending sobs. Day moved without thinking, and in the next instant, she was in his arms, tucked under his chin and half across his lap as he stroked her back. "Hey... Hey, it's okay. We got out."

Day didn't say anything as she literally tried to burrow into him like some small creature. A small, wounded creature. At a loss for anything else to do, he made soothing noises as she cried.

Just what had happened to her to cause this sort of reaction? He'd seen people after disasters, seen survivors of combat zones and civil wars. Hell, he'd even seen hostage victims before the medical crews got to them. So he was familiar with shock and all its stages.

This wasn't shock. Not *just* shock anyway. This was something else as well.

Several moments went by, and her crying subsided into quiet tears and sniffles. But she didn't let go of him. Not just yet. She turned her head to look up at him, her eyes misty from tears.

Her gaze settled on his mouth, she sat up straighter, wiping tears

with the sleeves of her jacket. Settling both hands on his shoulders, she used them for support as she leaned in to press her lips softly on his.

*Holy hell, she was going to be the death of him!* Still not fully recovered from that highly charged, erotic dream, his defenses were at absolute zero. He'd been trying so hard as well, trying to keep the reaction of his body to a minimum as she cried in his arms. It really was crass to get a hard-on when she was in pieces like that.

He hadn't expected her to kiss him. And not like that, so sweet and innocent. He closed his eyes, head resting back against the seat and his hands light on her hips as she explored his mouth. Letting her lead the way, set the pace.

She went slowly, letting him savor the hot, wet kisses, innocent but slowly brimming with need. Her hands moved on to caress his beard-roughened face as she explored his mouth. She took all that he was giving her, while she gave everything she had in those kisses. Full of promise. Intense with passion. Sweet with their hint of innocence and honesty.

Day all but drowned in pleasure, in sensation. He wasn't an innocent by any stretch of the imagination. Hell, he hadn't been innocent since early in his teens. But there was something about the way she kissed him, the sweetness of her manner, that warned him to be careful. Most of his sexual encounters were brief and to the point. They usually involved a fair amount of alcohol, and he never remembered their names.

But there was something about this woman. She wasn't the love 'em and leave 'em type. She shouldn't be doing this, not with him. Not with a guy who had so much blood on his hands it would probably take three reincarnations just to get them clean. Carefully, calling himself all kinds of idiot, he slowed the kiss down and broke away.

"Rollie, we...you shouldn't be doing this," he rumbled softly as his instincts, the ones that wanted to play this game to its conclusion, raged at him. They knew as well as he did that conclusion would be the two of them naked and getting sweaty together.

She kept trying to kiss his evasive lips at first, not quite herself as she was desperate for affection. She felt as if she could stay like this

forever, kissing him, and never grow tired of it. Greedy for more of the momentary show of emotion he had given her. She'd always played it safe and gone for cute but physically unintimidating scientist types. So she'd never had access to a body like his before, and she reveled at the privilege granted to her. But Day was more than just a hunk of steel encased in warm flesh. She felt attached to him. This went beyond than just physical for her. For her, it was something more.

He truly was handsome but not just that, his face shone with integrity and decency. Deep down, despite his occupation, she knew he wasn't one of the bad guys. Perhaps it was why she had treated him with sass instead of her usual disdain. He would never hurt her. Would he?

And then her logical brain kicked in, and she slowed down to an eventual halt. He was right. This wasn't the time or place. People intent on killing them were chasing them. And she felt guilty. She was taking advantage of him, despite how unusual it sounded considering that an hour ago she had been his captive.

"I'm... I'm sorry," she said as she moved away from him and quickly composed herself. "You're right. We shouldn't be doing this."

He stopped her movement with a hand on her arm. "I didn't mean like that." His voice was soft. Softer than even she had imagined it could be. "I meant...me and you." He paused and exhaled a long sigh while running his hands through his hair. Finally, he looked at her, his light eyes piercing all the way through to her soul.

"I would like nothing more than to strip those clothes off you and spend hours making you scream with pleasure, sweetheart." Regret clouded his eyes. Regret, and a hell of a lot of desire. "But...I'm not a nice man. A woman like you...you deserve someone nice. Not me."

"You're wrong," she said. "You are a nice man. Only a nice man would go out of his way to save someone he could have just left behind to save himself. Only a nice man would stop a woman from making love to him because he thought it was wrong. And only a nice man would do what you did when you thought you hurt my feelings."

"You're not as bad as you think you are," she said sincerely. "You're right. We shouldn't be doing this, but not for the reasons you

want to believe. I'm not buying it, and neither are you."

He shrugged, obviously not convinced by that argument, and turned the key to start the engine.

"You're sweet, Rollie, but I'd eat you for breakfast and walk away without looking back." He arched an eyebrow at her. "Can you handle that? No, I thought not."

She was quiet for a moment. She was convinced he was putting on a show for her benefit. She'd love nothing more than to take up his challenge. But they needed to get somewhere safe before she proved him wrong. The sod actually thought she wasn't woman enough for him. Fat chance at that. Her feminine pride was at stake here as well, and she wasn't about to let him get away with issuing that challenge and not getting a proper response. She swallowed her pride and zipped up her jacket. "Where exactly are we?"

He drove across the parking lot and pulled out onto the highway before he answered. "About sixty miles outside Crowsford," he said. "We'll take a break there, switch vehicles."

Crowsford. Great, they were stuck in some hick town. If this was about what she thought it was, she was going to need help to end this. And if they took too long, this entire ordeal would end with their violent deaths.

She didn't say anything else during the drive, just looked out the window. Day kept sliding glances at her, but she tried to ignore him. Finally, they reached the small town. It was a bit above a one-horse town, but not by much. He pulled into the motel and parked in front of the office. "I'll get us a room. We need sleep before we move on."

She stopped him with a hand on his arm. "One thing though."

He looked over his shoulder at her. "What's that?"

"You know my name. What do I call you?"

He paused for a second. "Dayton Vann."

## Chapter Six

*I am not going to have sex with Rollie. I am not going to have sex with Rollie. I am not going to have sex with Rollie.*

Day repeated the mantra in his head as he stood in the shower. Apart from the fact that he quite literally stank, he'd come in here to escape. To get his head together before he snapped and pinned his lovely ex-captive down on the bed and gave her a night neither of them would forget.

"You're a fucking idiot, Day." He cursed urgently under his breath, his hands braced on the grubby white tile of the shower as he shoved his head under the spray. He'd been done in the shower for a while, soaped and shampooed until he was squeaky clean. Hell, he'd even have shaved if he'd managed to pick up a razor in their desperate dash from the cabin if it helped him avoid having to go back out there. Perhaps if he took long enough, the fates would be kind and she'd have fallen asleep from sheer boredom.

Rollie fumed as she sat on the bed, ruminating their earlier encounter. It hurt that Day saw her as a girl and not woman enough for him. She had never been able to share any significant emotional moment with any man long enough to break through the wall of uncertainty that her unusual childhood had created. But being kidnapped, shot at, nearly killed, and then saved by her own captor, she had never experienced anything as traumatic as this with another person, particularly a man. And the same man treated her like every other man had treated her in the

past; like some weak-willed bloody wallflower.

Well to *hell* with that. She was tired of waiting for the right man to get close. Then when he finally did, he imposed what he wanted and disregarded her desires. This was more than just feminine pride. She needed to realize that she was still alive. But she wouldn't share that chance with any other man. God only knew why. She didn't. Or perhaps she did know, but she was afraid to realize it.

Realization dawned slowly as she stood, decision made. It was the work of seconds to strip her clothes. Then she was in the bathroom, opening the shower curtain to stare at his soap-and-water-slicked body.

He pulled his head from under the spray, gasping as he drew a full breath and slicked his hair back off his face. She reached out a hand and touched his bare shoulder.

It must have been instinct, and she felt stupid for sneaking up on him, because he twisted, pulling her into the shower and slamming her up against the wall, his forearm pressing hard against her throat.

"Oh, shit!" he exclaimed, dropping his hands from her, but then grabbing her as she slipped in the slick shower stall. She ended up in his arms, naked body against naked body

She was drenched in seconds as the tepid water sluiced down her body. But she didn't—couldn't—take her eyes from his. First, because she had trouble understanding what she saw in his. Second, because she was afraid of looking down at his body and ending up making a fool of herself. She could already feel the sensuality of their slick embrace as he held her close against the chilled tile wall. Her nipples hardened to aching points, and she was sure it wasn't from the cold.

They were still for several moments, held by each other's surprised gazes under the spray. Rollie was first to move, and she raised a cautious yet curious hand toward Day's chest. A tentative touch, and then a little bit more insistent as she felt human warmth, rock hard muscle, and the pounding of his heart, which seemed to echo her own.

"This isn't a good idea." Day's free hand snaked out and caught her wrist. "Playing with fire, sweetheart. You sure you want to do that?"

Despite his words, Rollie knew he was just being a nice guy,

because she could feel his solid hardness grazing her belly. She knew he was holding himself back. Intense butterflies escalated as they traveled throughout her body before curling her toes. She kept her gaze on her hand on his chest and followed it as she slowly ran it across the sleek, warm surface of velvet wrapped around granite.

She normally didn't do this—go after men. Despite the way she looked and her badass personality, she was rather vulnerable in the sex and romance department. Work kept her busy, and a childhood spent on survival, study, and work had kept her from developing normal relationships. She always thought things through and was very careful. She was as nervous as all hell, but all she had gone through in the past several hours made her feel that for once, she deserved to be happy. That she deserved this, to feel alive and to experience a rare opportunity that she knew would never come again.

So she looked up at him, determined, and then slid up against him as she rose on tiptoe to kiss him softly on the mouth.

Day's breath exploded from his lungs as her hand trailed down his chest and over his taut stomach.

"I'm *so* going to hell for this," he murmured, leaning down to catch her lips with his own. His kiss was deep and thorough as he crowded her against the tiled wall, leaning into her as he kissed her. A kiss which left no doubt as to where this was going, and how.

She couldn't help the moan of pleasure as he took her with possessiveness. She felt how a woman should feel. As though she really did belong to this powerful, virile man. Submissive in the kiss, she found her arms wrapping around his neck to pull closer to him. His tongue explored every crevice of her mouth, teasing her lips, slowly tempting her tongue to play with his.

She was stuck between a rock and the wall, and she had never felt safer. The warmth of his body dispelled all discomforts of the cold. Her feet began to ache at the extended position, but she didn't care. Her leg seesawed restlessly against his; her soft inner thigh brushed against his, which was harder and rougher by contrast.

She wrapped herself around him, every movement sending his

arousal higher into the stratosphere. Tapping reserves of control he hadn't known he had, Day pulled away. His breathing ragged, he rested his forehead against hers for a few seconds. Every instinct, every cell in his body, screamed for him to take what she offered.

"Not here. There's not enough room," he murmured half to himself before bending to pick her up. She fit easily in his arms as he stepped out of the shower, grateful he'd put the towel down earlier. Slipping over with her in his arms would just kill the mood dead.

Quick strides took them into the bedroom. Day stopped in front of the bed, holding her dark brown gaze with his own. He felt every soft curve and hollow as she slid against him. He shivered, fighting the urge to spread her over the bed and bury himself in her soft, welcoming body.

But he couldn't. From the pleading look in her eyes earlier to her hesitant manner now, he could tell she needed this. Not so much him, but this. An affirmation of life. His heart twisted in his chest for a moment. *Take what's offered, Day, and don't think about the rest.* He locked the unformed thoughts away and took her lips again in a blazing kiss.

Tears rolled down her cheek, and he swept them away with his thumb as he deepened the kiss. His tongue swept out and stroked her top lip, his heart thundering as she opened easily for him. Everything about her, every response, was perfect. As though she had been made for him and him alone.

*Now, now, Day. Don't go getting carried away. She'll get over this, get over you, and return to her old life.*

He shook his head mentally, ignoring the voice again. She'd offered him heaven, and he intended to taste it fully before it slipped away.

Slowly, he eased her back onto the bed until she lay full length and he leaned over her. She was so tiny compared to his larger frame. He felt like a brute in comparison. He stroked his hand along her thigh, stopping to marvel at the difference between their skin. The sensual difference of his hair-roughened thigh and her smooth, silky one.

His hand traveled higher, smoothing into the curve of her waist before he cupped her breast and flicked his thumb over her nipple. Her sharp intake of breath made him smile. "You like that, huh?"

Her eyes drifted shut again as he played with her breast. Her back arched and filled his hand with her flesh as she moaned. He flicked her nipple again, and she gasped. "Oh, yes. Very much," she whispered, almost a whimper. She raised her arms over her head and grabbed handfuls of the sheets, restraining herself. Presenting herself to him.

"Christ, you're killing me here." He groaned at the sight and leaned down to replace his thumb with his mouth. He flicked his tongue over the tight peak once, twice, then sucked it into his mouth. He splayed his hands over her ribcage and suckled lightly, rolling the engorged flesh against his lips and tongue.

It wasn't enough. It was never going to be enough. He trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses down her taut stomach. He paused at her hip, fascinated by the silky skin of her belly. He kissed lightly, chuckling as she started.

"You're very...ah...nnnaughty..." she managed as he continued his delightful exploration.

He chuckled, his lips against her skin. "Oh, I can get worse than this," he promised, moving lower. His hands, more used to dealing with weaponry than the delicate curves of a woman's body, gently urged her thighs apart as he settled himself between them. Then he kissed along her thigh. Soft, teasing kisses as he worked his way higher. He was in no hurry, despite the insistent ache of his own body. This might be his only shot at this, and he was determined to make it perfect.

"You're going to drive me insane," she mumbled as she tilted her head to the side and tried to breathe normally. She was afraid she'd hyperventilate. But those fears were only secondary. She was suddenly nervous again, despite her willingness. Would she satisfy him? She had felt him, and incredible was the only way to describe him. He was obviously a man who had a lot of experience. What if she couldn't measure up?

Her train of thought was quickly derailed again as he started to kiss up her very sensitive inner thigh. He was so close, dangerously close to that part of her that longed for him. She was very, very wet, and she was a bit shy about it. The reverence and the adoration he rained on her body

dispelled some of her trepidation, and left her with a sense of awe and an impulse to cry. It was all so very sweet, it was painful.

But this moment was too beautiful to ruin with tears, so she held it in and let herself drown in the pleasures he had to offer. Maybe he'd find her amusing at least. Or maybe he'd be interested in the novelty of the moment. She was afraid for those thoughts to be true. But the way he touched her, caressed her...she couldn't think properly anymore, and she was thankful for that.

He moved again, his breath whispering over the sensitive folds of her sex. Then his tongue stroked over her, parting her labia and finding her clit with unerring accuracy. A deep rumble of contentment sounded in his throat as he tasted her, his tongue sweeping in long, slow licks, or quick flicks over her needy flesh.

"God, you taste fantastic," he whispered against her, his hands splaying out over her hips to hold her still as his clever tongue worked to drive her to heaven and back.

The second she felt his breath against her moistened sex, her heart seemed to stop. The second she felt the brush of his tongue on her, all she heard were erotic, breathy cries. Desperate. Needy. She didn't realize until a bit later that those cries came from her. All she felt was pure bliss, unselfish and giving. Adoring and reverent. Decadent.

Her body twitched with every quick flick of his tongue and shivered with every long lap. She gripped the sheets tightly, and her toes felt as if they were about to pop off. "Please... Oh, God, Day. I... I can't...so good..."

He ignored her plea. His fingers gripped her hips, not digging in but holding her still as he carried on. With his tongue, he ruthlessly flicked the hard nub of her clit, circled it, then swept long, hot strokes across it. He nibbled, and he teased, never once letting up or letting her catch her breath until her body was literally trembling with need.

Rollie buzzed with an unprecedented erotic high. With each stroke and lap, he brought her closer and closer to the brink, until she couldn't take anymore. One last flick of his tongue against her tortured clit, and she came apart in an explosive force that took her by surprise. She was so out

of breath that her cries of fulfillment strained to a weak whimper, and her body felt frozen by the delicious, paralytic bliss of her orgasm. But despite that, Day didn't stop, and once again she felt herself starting to climb toward the pinnacle of another orgasm.

He waited until her body passed through the boneless satisfaction stage, until her arousal started to build again. Then, when her hips started to rock, seeking more sensation, he gave her a last slow lick and pulled away.

"You're amazing, sweetheart." His voice was low and husky as he moved over her, parting her thighs wider with his knee. She was almost on the edge again. Dipping his hips, he brushed the swollen head of his cock at the slick entrance to her body, rubbing a little as he rotated his hips. Not enough to satisfy but more than enough to tease.

At that moment, she felt his cock against her sopping pussy, and her trepidation escalated to a slight panic. Would she be able to satisfy him? She debated on whether or not to tell him. She was afraid of how he'd react, but despite one massive orgasm, she was still incredibly aroused and in serious need of him inside her. Filling her. She couldn't have it any other way. She wanted to be so good for him...the best she possibly could.

"Day, I'm...I need...please..." She moaned, trying to form a coherent sentence as she arched herself towards him, trying to feel more of him against her. She rubbed hands all over him in disorganized desperation.

He heard her plea, but he was too far gone to think much on it. He settled for making soothing noises as he pressed into her. It was like sinking into bliss. Her hot, tight body closed around him, and Day nearly lost it there and then.

He moved slowly, a soft rocking of his hips as he worked his way deeper into her body in small degrees, giving her time to get used to him and allow her body to stretch to accommodate him. She was so tiny; he didn't want to hurt her.

Then he hit a barrier, and his blood ran cold. "Rollie?" he said warily, stopping stock-still.

"No, please don't stop," she pleaded as she tried to get closer to him. "Please, Day."

She wrapped herself around him so quickly he could literally feel her worry. Not worry over what they were doing, but worry about what? That he wouldn't go through with it? Amazed, he kissed her forehead, feeling an unaccustomed rush of tenderness. Didn't she know she was too good for him, that she could have any man she wanted? Any man would give his eyeteeth to bed her, never mind take her innocence. But for some reason, she'd chosen him. Quite why, he didn't know.

Her small hand swept up his back, along the sensitive skin over his spine. He groaned. He should stop. But there was no way on earth that was happening.

"I'm sorry, babe. This is going to hurt," he whispered, and in one quick move, drove himself deeper into her body until he was seated to the hilt.

He held still, the muscles in his neck standing out as he waited for her body to relax around him. Then he started a slow, seductive rhythm.

Triumph filled him.

Not only was she his, but he was her first, her *only* lover. He murmured something and pulled her closer. His arm looped under her neck as his other hand pulled her thigh over his hip, allowing him to sink deeper with each thrust. Thrusts that got harder and heavier as his control began to slip.

She could feel his every stroke deep inside of her. As he moved slowly, she savored the moment, and the infinite care with which he treated her emboldened her. As quickly as it arrived, the pain faded, and she didn't ever want to let him go. She groaned in pleasure as he stroked harder, deeper, and faster. He was her first, and she was happy that it had been him. He was so tender, considerate, and magnificent. It was then that she knew she had fallen in love with him. Smiling with the secret knowledge of her feelings, she pressed herself closer to him and answered every thrust with a movement of her own, bringing him deeper inside her so he filled her completely.

## **Chapter Seven**

He was going to break her heart.

Day dug into the breakfast the diner waitress slid in front of him with the enthusiasm of a starving man and put the thought out of his mind. He was starving. He'd been up half the night, and there was no way a guy could make love to a woman like Rollie for that length of time without needing serious sustenance afterwards.

"So, tell me about the woman the press think is you," he said, careful not to mention her by name. He didn't think anyone would be listening in on their conversation in a small-town diner, but he couldn't be too careful.

Compared to his ravenous hunger, Rollie poked at her food and drank too much coffee. She didn't seem very happy, yet she managed the weak smile of a sleep-deprived, sexually satisfied woman.

"Some companies over the years have hired figureheads to sit at the top as the image they project," said Rollie with a kind fondness in her tone. "Marie was like that, and so much more. She was my mentor. Growing up as rough as I did, I might have ended up dead in a ditch somewhere or worse, a crack whore. She taught second grade science, and we met after I hid in her tool shed when the rain hit."

She picked up her coffee and started to drink but then set it down, picking up a piece of toast instead and nibbling on it. "Fortunately for me, she didn't turn me in. She took one look at me and all the science books of hers scattered all over the place that I had dug out from her boxes, and she

took me in. She wanted to adopt me, but there were certain circumstances, and it was impossible. Despite that, I've been with her ever since, and I couldn't have imagined a better way for my life to turn out.

"In every sense of the word apart from biological, Marie was my mother. When I started rising, I took her with me. There was no way I was leaving her behind. When I finally started the company after my first few projects took flight, she was more than happy to assume my identity when I asked her."

She laughed. "She knew how much I hated the politicking and the limelight. She knew it bothered me and disrupted my workflow. I've always liked to work with my hands. Mixing other things in it just messed things up for me."

Day nodded slightly and tried not to let his surprise show on his face. From the way Rollie acted and talked, he'd pegged her for some fat cat's daughter, raised in luxury and educated at the best schools money could buy. His respect for her rose more than a few notches at the revelation. She was a kid off the streets. Like he was. They were kindred spirits.

Day speared a sausage and flicked her a glance. "So, the million-dollar question. Who would want to kill you?"

Rollie shrugged. "That's just it. I can't think of people who would want to kill Caroline Gavilan. They would want to kidnap her, but killing is counterproductive," she stated, referring to herself in third person. "But then, I guess I can't think of anyone who would want to kill *me*, either. The real me." Then a thought seemed to have struck her, and her brow furrowed in thought. "Unless...sonofabitch," she muttered. "Those greedy bastards."

"Talk to me. Which greedy bastards?"

"Of course. This has everything to do with the Icarus Project. Dammit!" She pounded the table in emphasis and causing everyone else to look at her in surprise. Dropping her voice, she spoke in a more discreet tone. "The Icarus Project is the latest and the biggest project GTC has ever done. It's something I've been working on for years, even before I started the company. Basically, we've developed a new kind of energy system

that taps the high yield of photon particles.

"Can you imagine? High electrical yield from a relatively small amount of electromagnetic energy. It's cheap, efficient, safe, compact, and best of all, it's renewable. This will change the world. And, as you can imagine, put quite a few energy companies out of business. Specifically..."

"Industrial assassination. Yeah, I'm with you. Your competitors don't want you to finish development, or even talk about it." Day shook his head. "Who are we talking about? The guy who hired me was a middleman but, whoever it is, they've got money, that's for sure. Those goons that came after us were a professional outfit."

"It's not just the competition that's involved here. There are a lot of people out there who stand to lose a lot if we bring this tech into daylight. Marie was supposed to make a presentation of the project at the Global Energy Summit next week, and if she had, it would have been the beginning of the end for the traditional energy companies. That's why they had Marie killed, and that's why they had you kidnap me and then have the both of us killed out here in the middle of nowhere. To the world, Caroline Gavilan is already dead, and Icarus dies a silent death.

"Though, if I were to pick a suspect? The best guess would be Blackwell Industries. Not only do they have tech development like GTC, but they are much larger than we are. They have agricultural, mining, and transportation interests, but their biggest investment is their energy empire. Plus, George Blackwell hates my guts.

"They've just signed a deal with the European Union to outsource management of their nuclear plants to them, and it's a deal worth billions. He's got another deal going with Washington to do the same thing for even bigger money. They've already given up quite a bit of their other investments just for this project, and rumor has it that they're already having some financial issues. Imagine what would happen if I suddenly came along with my little reactor?"

"He'd do anything to stop you." Day put his cutlery down, his expression grim. "This is serious, Rollie. If he's got that kind of money, he can just keep paying people to come after you. What do you want to do?"

"There's only one thing *to* do. We have to get this tech out in the

open, but it can't be just any smalltime press conference. Nothing would be achieved. Blackwell has a lot of hold in the media.

"We're going to have to go to Seattle and attend the summit."

Day nodded. Once that was public domain, the cat was out of the bag, and they'd have no reason to come after Rollie. He gave up the idea of walking away. There was no way he could leave her to face this alone. She could shoot, yeah, but if not for him, she'd be a corpse in a mountain cabin right now. "Then we're going to need backup and some serious firepower."

Rollie smiled. "Can't do backup. Considering you managed to kidnap me so easily—not that I question your skills or anything—I don't trust my people right now. But firepower? That I can help with."

Day nodded. "Backup I can do." His voice was quiet and even he could hear the resignation in it. People owed him favors, yes, but for this kind of backup he needed the help of one man. And Hayden Edge was not a man who owed anyone. If anything, Day would end up owing Edge, and knowing the hard-nosed ex-commando as he did, it would mean a job and all the sorts of things Day had been trying to avoid. A regular job, a house, friends. Normal things a guy like him had no right to.

If Rollie was alarmed at the subtle change in his demeanor, she didn't show it. "You got a plan?" she asked. "I'm all ears."

Day's lips compressed. "Yeah, I got a plan. I need to make a call, but yeah, I got a plan." *A plan that's going to cost me my soul, but a plan nonetheless.* He pushed away from the table and stood. "Come on. We need to find a phone."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Department of Energy. How may I direct your call?" asked the voice from the other end.

"Experimental Research Division, please. Doctor Chuck Harper," said Rollie. Music quickly replaced the voice as she was put on hold. Rollie sighed and watched Day out of the corner of her eye. He'd made a brief and terse call before handing the phone over to her. One she could

only assume was with a man that Day didn't feel comfortable with but had no other choice but to call. But Day was right; they couldn't afford to make mistakes like they had back at the cabin. Mistakes were potentially lethal.

So, Rollie decided to bring in some bigger guns while she was underground. She had a few friends she knew she could count on.

"Chuck Harper speaking," said the smooth male voice on the other end.

"Chuck! It's me, Rollie."

"Rollie? Jesus. Thank God you're safe," he said with obvious relief. "It was chaos back at your office ever since your mother..." He paused, sounding uncertain. "Then I heard you were missing. I was tapping my buddies at the FBI to find you. What happened?"

"A friend rescued me." Rollie glanced at Day standing outside the phone booth. "He knew I would be in danger. He took me away just before Marie was... I didn't know they would do that to her."

"Rollie, I'm so sorry about Marie. But things are a little hot right now. My buddies at the Bureau are telling me that someone is quietly looking for you, and I don't think they're your friends. What's this about? Christ, your life could be in danger."

"It is in danger. Which is why I need your help." Rollie then told him about Icarus and her plans.

"Damn, you're going to make a lot of rich, powerful people angry. No wonder you're being hunted."

"I know. Chuck, my only hope to end this is to attend that summit and present the reactor there. If the world discovers my creation, they would have no more reason to kill me to keep me quiet. But I know they're going to be watching the summit, and I'm pretty sure they'll nab me before I even get to the front doors."

"What can I do to help?" he asked earnestly.

Moments later, Rollie hung up the phone and stepped outside to join Day. "It's done."

Day nodded, just a short, sharp jerk of his head. The lover she'd been with last night was gone, and in his place was the man Rollie had

first met, the dangerous loner who'd kidnapped her. Not for the first time, she wondered exactly what Day's background was, and if Day was even his real name. Didn't that sort of man always have an alias, a cover identity, *a la* Bond? But, try as she might, she just couldn't imagine him as the suave, sophisticated super-spy. Oh, he undoubtedly had the skill, but there was something inherently decent about him. She couldn't see him being able or willing to lie, cheat, and charm his way like the movie character.

"You told him the right time and place?" he asked as they walked away from the phone booth. He'd done something to the phone before he'd let her make the call, presumably concealing their location somehow, but these weren't amateurs they were going up against. If they were really serious about finding her, eventually they would. She knew that.

"Yes, I did," said Rollie as she kept up with him. "Day, it's okay. I trust him. He's one of the few people who know who I really am, and they're not that plenty. I'm like a sister to him."

He shot her a look, his expression hard. "Don't trust anyone, Rollie. Everyone's got a price, even me. Remember that."

\* \* \* \* \*

The man lowered his headset for a moment as soon as the call ended and got out of the van not far away from a government building. He had been sitting in that chair for the better part of six hours, and he was tired, hungry, and needed a drink. As he breathed in fresh air, a refreshing change from the stale air inside the van, he reached for his flask. As he brought the dented metal container to his lips, he realized he had drunk the last of it an hour ago.

"Shit," he muttered as he shoved the flask in the pocket of his hopelessly wrinkled slacks and opted for a smoke instead. His phone began to vibrate in his other pocket, and he took a moment to take a drag of his cigarette before he pulled his cell out and flipped it open.

"Did we get what we needed?" asked the voice on the other end.

"Yes, we did. She's doing exactly as you told us she'd do."

"Do you have any indication that her good friend knows about us?"

"He doesn't, but if he did, I can always fix that."

"Don't be too hasty. We don't want to rack up the body count more than we need to. We don't want undue attention on us."

"Yeah, I get that."

"Do you have the details of the conversation?"

"I sent it to you a few minutes ago. It should be there now."

"I just received it. It looks good. Excellent work."

"You want me to keep listening here?"

"No, leave that to the rookie. I want you at the site. We need to make the proper preparations."

"I'll be there." He flipped his cell shut, flicked the half-smoked cigarette away, and got back into the van.

A younger man at the surveillance console looked up at him. "What did they say?"

He didn't answer at first, instead withdrawing his Glock 19 from his shoulder holster and checking the magazine before chambering a round. "You stay here. I've got an errand to run." He reholstered his piece and patted his jacket into place to cover it.

"How long do I have to stick around?"

"I'll let you know," he said as he stepped out of the van, sliding the door shut behind him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rollie sat in the passenger seat of the rather nicely restored Charger they'd "borrowed" from the long-term parking garage not far from the diner. They'd been waiting for almost an hour, and she was starting to get a cramp in her leg from her tense position. She wanted to sit on the hood as she waited, but Day had said she would be an easy target for snipers. Not that being in a car was any different, but at least she had something between her and a potential threat.

Day looked across at her, his eyes amused. "You can move, you

know. I don't think wriggling your toes once in a while is going to bring down the wrath of God on us."

Her gaze swept over him sitting in the driver's seat as though nothing at all was amiss. One arm rested on the open window. His shirt was open to reveal the toned planes of his chest, while shades concealed his eyes. Damn him. How could he look so calm and collected when her nerves were almost fried to a crisp?

"What's taking them so long?" she asked, annoyed, as she glanced at the clock on the dashboard. "Leave it to the feds to be late to their own party."

Technically, the feds were only a few minutes late, but Rollie had insisted on being there early. Day concurred, saying it gave them a chance to scope out the terrain before the meet. Just then, three dark Crown Victorias rolled around the corner and stopped just a few feet away. The cars were stereotypically government types, and she couldn't ever remember a time when she was so relieved to be meeting with government suits.

Day didn't move, but she could tell he was alert, ready for anything. She flicked him a glance, looking for something, perhaps reassurance. She jumped a little as his hand, warm and callused, covered hers. He slid his sunglasses down his nose a little to look at her, a nose she noticed had a slight bump in it, as though it had been broken at some point.

"It's going to be fine. I promise," he said soothingly. "You just go out there and hand the stuff over, then we can disappear until the furor dies down, okay?"

She blinked, caught by his eyes for a moment. Did he realize what he'd said, there? *We*. Was he staying with her despite what he'd said about walking away, or was this just a figure of speech, a platitude designed to calm her down enough to go out there and do what needed to be done?

She smiled back, her lips quirking in an unsteady curve, and looked out the windshield. They sat in a nondescript parking lot, like hundreds of others the state over. Dust from the desert rifted across the

asphalt in lazy spirals until it mounted up in the corners by the curb. She took a deep breath and reached for the door handle.

As she opened her door, several men in dark suits got out of the cars and stood at the ready. Their apparent leader, a burly older man, threw away his cigarette and sauntered toward her. She was still nervous, more so because she wanted all this to end. But where was Chuck?

"Doctor Gavilan?"

She nodded in response as he took out a leather ID case and flashed his badge. "Special Agent Dan Morrow, FBI. I apologize for our delay, but your friend Doctor Harper was very insistent that I make sure you were safe, so I had to bring along my team. We've been making preparations for you. You'll need to come with us."

"Of course." She nodded. "Where's Doctor Harper, by the way?"

"I'm afraid that he was detained by a loose end he said he wanted to take care of before he saw you. He said for us to meet at the safe house when everything has been secured. We gotta go, Doc. We're not sure who's eyeballing us at this moment." The agent gestured to their surroundings.

Rollie looked from the FBI agent in front of her to Day on the other side of the car. His door was open, and he was leaning one arm on the roof as he silently watched the interplay. She wished she could see his eyes, see what he was thinking, but his glasses hid them.

Looking back at Agent Morrow, Rollie nodded, trying to hide her reluctance. She had a nagging feeling something was wrong, which was bizarre. These people were FBI, for heaven's sake. They were talking safe houses and close protection; she would be safe with them. But all she wanted to do was get back in the car and beg Day to take her back to the motel where they'd spent the night. Go back to the safe cocoon of his arms.

"What about Day?" she asked him.

"Him?" Morrow frowned as he looked at the lone figure standing next to the Charger. "Sorry, Doc, but our orders were to prioritize your safety. We really have to go now."

Despite her unease, she walked toward the lone van at the back of

the convoy. It was just an ordinary van; her company had several of them, and she had ridden in them before. But why was she suddenly feeling adamant about not getting inside?

Her footsteps got slower and slower as she approached, and she was about to turn and look back when Day's voice broke the silence in the lot.

"Rollie, they're not FBI!"

As if that was the signal, all hell broke loose. Morrow's men drew their weapons, and bullet holes peppered the hood and door of the Charger where Day had been just a moment before. Screaming, she turned to run, but Morrow grabbed her hard around the waist before she could escape.

"Oh, no, you little bitch," he snarled as he dragged her toward the van. "You're coming with us. Mr. Blackwell's paid good money to get hold of you, and we wouldn't want him to be disappointed, would we?"

If Morrow had been expecting Rollie to act like most women and start to struggle and scream hysterically, then he was going to be disappointed. Instead, she let loose with a powerful elbow to his gut, followed by the back of her fist slamming against his nose. She was tired of getting dragged around, and she was through letting the bad guys get their way. As Morrow staggered back, his nose bleeding, she started to go for the gun he'd he dropped.

The sound of a hammer clicking above her stopped her cold. She looked up and saw a murderous Morrow holding a snub-nosed revolver trained at her head. A backup weapon she hadn't counted on. He took a moment to press his thumb against his nose to straighten it with a muffled crack. "You'll regret doing that. I'll make sure you do."

He swung, and the next thing Rollie felt was incredible pain along her jaw as she landed on her ass. Morrow grabbed her by the hair and yanked her toward the van.

"Kill the merc and move out!"

Rollie watched the scene unfold as though it were a DVD on slow replay. Day fired back, yelling something at her. At least, she assumed he was yelling. His mouth was moving, but she couldn't hear anything over

the sound of gunfire and the roaring of her heart in her ears.

Morrow yanked on her hair again, bringing tears of pain to her eyes. She kept her gaze riveted on Day as he fought to get to her. He returned fire from behind the Charger, lethal shots that had Morrow cursing foully beside her.

Then it happened. Day leaned out of cover for just a second too long, and a bullet found its mark. His big body jerked as he was hit, vivid scarlet splashing across his shirt and spreading.

*"Day!"*

The scream of anguish came from the depths of her soul. Apparently, Morrow had had enough of her noise and swung yet again. This time her pain was quickly overwhelmed with blackness and then...nothing.

## Chapter Eight

He hurt. Day lay in the dust where the fake FBI agents had left him, one kick to his prone body convincing them he was dead or dying, and listened as the engines faded into the distance. He'd get up in a moment, he told himself. He just needed a second to get his breath back, and then he'd deal with his arm.

Consciousness faded in and out. Each time he became aware, pain greeted him...and something else. Something important he needed to do. He opened his eyes and stared up at the sun, which beat down on his weary body, wincing as it blinded him. Groaning, he tried to roll to his side to get away, but agony sliced through him and blackness claimed him again.

"Dayton Vann, you idle son of a bitch, wake up!"

Day flinched at the slap on the side of his face. A shadow of a figure stood over him, blotting out the sun. Something pushed him over to his back.

"Don't make me repeat myself, boy," said a gruff voice. "Ain't in the mood to get annoyed." Everything swam back as he recognized the voice. Hayden Edge. Who else would treat a gunshot victim like a sack of potatoes?

"I just got shot, man," he croaked. "Cut me a little slack."

"Stop moving, goddammit, and let me look." Edge reached over and checked the injury. "You can stop whining now, you pansy. It's just a flesh wound." He produced a field kit and a roll of bandages.

Day blinked as he looked up, trying to clear the dust from his eyes. "A flesh wound?" he asked in disbelief. "I was hit at least three...arrgh!" He broke off as Edge decided that it was an appropriate moment to dig into one of his wounds after a bullet. "Fucking *hell*, Edge, give a guy some warning, would you?" he asked when he got his breath back.

"Yeah, yeah." Edge checked the bullet. "Full metal jacket. These guys really didn't like you, did they?" The flow of blood from the most serious of the three hits stopped as Edge finished his basic treatment. "Not gonna qualify me for a fancy M.D., but it'll hold till we get you to the safe house and get the rest of them bullets out of you." Edge shifted the cheroot on his mouth to the other side before reaching down to help Day up. "Okay, up you go, boy."

Day grunted as Edge hauled him to his feet, where he swayed as his body adjusted to the change in position. His head swam. Blackness threatened to claim him again.

"Oh, no, you don't." Edge shoved a solid shoulder into Day's uninjured side and held him upright as Day struggled to stay conscious. "You stay awake and tell me about this little problem and why people been trying to kill you. Not that they need a reason. People been trying to kill you for years. Me included."

Day grabbed hold of the other man's shoulder and hung on. He needed to stay on his feet. If he hit the deck again like this, he wasn't going anywhere, and Rollie needed him.

"One word. Gavilan."

"Fuck."

Day managed a short bark of a laugh, then winced as pain lanced through his injured shoulder and the ribcage on that side. "Yeah, that about sums it up."

Edge eased back a little, obviously assessing whether Day was okay standing on his own. It was an assessment Day himself was fairly interested in the result of. Finally, Edge nodded and stepped back, obviously convinced Day wasn't going to face-plant in the dirt yet. Day didn't put too much faith in his unsteady legs and half-walked, half-staggered the few steps to lean against the hood of the battered

Charger.

Edge followed him, leaning one hip against the hood as he offered Day a smoke. Day shook his head, sliding his companion a sidelong look. Rollie might have thought Day was dangerous, but Hayden Edge was a cut above, and then some. He was a tall man, with a lean, wiry build from years in the field, both in service and after it, running his own outfit. Whiskers covered his upper lip and chin, too short to be called a beard and too thick to be called stubble. Striking ice-blue eyes watched Day with interest.

"Done eyeing me up, or you want me to pirouette as well?" he asked in amusement. "Now, you were about to tell me about this clusterfuck you got yourself into. Because we're *way* past a SNAFU with this one and edging toward pooch-screw territory. So, out with it."

Day snorted. "Eloquent as ever, I see." Amusement filled him, but not enough to make him laugh. He didn't think that was a good idea, thanks to his current condition. Why Edge talked the way he did, Day had never figured out. Unlike Day, Edge could and had pulled the full-on James Bond routine in the past. His English accent was cut-glass if he chose to exert himself, yet he spoke like the ex-commando he was.

"Spit it out, boy. Told you I ain't in the mood to get annoyed."

"All right. Don't get your panties in a bunch. I took a job—"

"You took the *Gavilan* job. What are you, fucking nuts?" Edge looked at him as though he'd grown another head.

Day sighed. In hindsight, it had been a bad move. But the deal had looked good, too good to be true if he looked back on it, and it was. "Yeah, it was a good deal. One last job, and I can buy my cabin and retire."

"Yeah, and I dream of having a mansion filled with bikini-clad supermodels with soccer ball implants and the sex drive of rabbits in heat. But too bad, dreams don't really come true. Not the good ones, anyway." The sarcasm dripped from Edge's tone.

"What did I tell you about jobs that were too easy to be true? You really thought a simple snatch and grab would be worth that much? Heck, a rookie fresh out of the farm could have done that job cheaper, and then he would have gotten his stupid head blown off." Edge's tone was a

toss-up between amused, incredulous, and plain old frustrated as he looked at Day as though contemplating boxing his ears for being such an idiot. "So what do you plan on doin'? With two dings and a bleeder, you're not gonna be prancing about anywhere."

"You don't like false tits. Said that often enough." Day couldn't help it. The response was automatic as he recovered from Edge's verbal assault.

Edge moved, and Day responded on instinct, rolling his good shoulder and bringing his arm up to cover his head as the older man clipped him around the ear like the rookie he had been when they'd first met.

"Okay, okay. I need some help. I got to get her out of there. They aren't going to let her walk. Not after something like this." His voice held an edge of pleading, which surprised him. It obviously surprised Edge as well.

Day recognized the look Edge gave him, and it was the same one he gave the rookies when he was sizing them up. Edge only had two categories for rookies: good enough, and civilians. And right now, the ex-commando was trying to see where Day fell.

"Shit, boy. Don't tell me you're in love with the doc. 'Cause I got a fresh one right here if you say yes." He pulled his hand back for emphasis.

Day's lip curled, ready for a contemptuous *of course not*, but then he paused. *Did* he love Rollie? His face obviously mirrored his indecision, because Edge snorted. Day looked up, schooling his expression. "Then go for it, because the answer's yes." Quite how it had happened, he didn't know. Somewhere between their desperate flight from the cabin and her hesitant seduction routine in the shower, he'd fallen head over heels for her.

"I said it years ago, and I'll say it again. Vann, you're a moron." Edge shook his head, then was silent for a moment as he contemplated. "I don't want to risk following them right now. We could, but they've got heavier firepower, and there's more of them."

The older man dug the keys out of his pocket and headed for a beat-up, red truck. "We can track them down and come up with a plan. I'll

call up some of my National Security pals and try to see if they can task a satellite to look for your girlfriend."

Day frowned. "Okay, genius, how you going to accomplish that? Because last time I checked, satellite tracking still needed a transponder. And believe me, she's got nothing like that on her." His voice was smug. He had checked her. Several times. *All* over.

Edge smacked him at the back of the head. "Get your mind out of the bedroom. Satellites pick up more than just GPS, but we don't need a tracker on your girlfriend, we just need to track the bad guys. We can pick up chatter from this area from cellphones. They gotta make a call sometime to their boss, right? Once they figure out which cellphones belong to the bad guys, my pals can lock on to them and give us a good picture of where they're going. When they're locked, it won't matter if its pitch dark or if they turn off the phones. The satellite will track them wherever they go."

Day nodded, casting a look back at the Charger. Noting worth saving there, even if it hadn't been stolen in the first place. Something Rollie hadn't been happy about anyway. "Whatever it takes. I just gotta find her."

\* \* \* \* \*

The first thing Rollie realized when she finally came to was that her neck ached like a son of a bitch. Even worse than the bump she'd gotten from being whacked by that douche of a fake FBI agent. Or maybe he was real but on someone else's payroll. She really didn't care.

Her captors put her in a dark, dank room that seemed to be the basement of somewhere. If they had thrown in a few rats and some chains bolted to the walls, she could have sworn she was an unwilling extra in a cheesy B movie. The only glory points to those disasters were the hero's muscles and skill in killing underpaid and semi-skilled henchmen, and the leading lady's ability to look vulnerable and wickedly hot in ridiculously skimpy attire. Rollie had always hated women like that.

But she would have given anything for this to be a B movie. Even if

she had to endure looking like a hysterical porn star just to make the hero look good, it would have meant Day would still be alive.

She sat up from her slouch, and her abused muscles complained. She tried to rub her aching neck, but discovered she was cuffed to the chair.

She closed her eyes for a moment to will away the spinning room but instead found herself reliving the few seconds in slow motion when the bullets had struck Day's body and he fell to the ground in an unmoving heap.

She snapped her eyes open and struggled to breathe. She wanted to stop the flow of tears, but she couldn't. Then she didn't bother. There wasn't any point.

"Oh, Day," she whispered as grief threatened to overwhelm her. She loved him, and he was dead. All her life, she'd been looking for someone to love, waiting for this feeling of belonging and happiness. As soon as she'd found it, it was taken from her.

She stared up at the ceiling. Her sobs were silent, only her ragged breaths indicating her heartbreak as tears spilled over from her unseeing eyes.

And then slowly, as the tears fell and dried up, anger began to take their place. She had been born in the ugliest recesses of so-called civilized society, and she had fought for everything she ever had. She never knew her parents, and the only family she knew had been murdered. And then there was Day.

She quickly stifled her thoughts when she heard several footsteps approaching from the other side of the door. She swiped her tears away as the rusty lock twisted open. The door swung open and slammed against the wall.

"Right, bitch. Time to get to work." Dark figures converged on her, and she was uncuffed and hauled from the chair. She had sat twisted in the chair for so long that her legs had gone numb. She stumbled as they shoved her from the room, only the hard grip on her arm keeping her upright as she was bundled up the stairs and into the brightly lit corridor beyond. She winced, her eyes frantically trying to adjust after the darkness

of the basement.

"Christ, you ain't much to look at like this, are you?" One of the pseudo-agents sneered. "Gotta hope that you've got more than air in that head, otherwise Mr. Blackwell ain't got no use for you. And if you ain't useful..."

Rollie glared up at the man who shot. "Well, with that broken nose, you're not really prince charming yourself," she croaked. "And that slowly emerging bald spot won't make your day any better, either."

"Bitch," he snarled, raising a hand, but then seemed to think better of it and shoved her along the corridor ahead of him. He opened a door. She saw the familiar confines of a lab beyond, and he viciously pushed her through it. "Plans are on the table. Get working. Oh, and take your time, sweetheart, because the longer you take, the longer I get you afterwards."

Pushed through the door with more force than courtesy, Rollie caught herself on the edge of one of the worktables with a muttered curse.

"There's more where that came from. Now get on with it." The fake FBI agent gestured at one corner of the lab. The workbench there contained tools and equipment she recognized. The rest of the lab was identical to pretty much every other lab she'd worked in, bar the armed guy standing outside the door and the blast shields on the windows.

"What, no tea and flowers? I'm insulted," quipped Rollie as she glowered at him. "You can tell your boss that I'm not making squat. And if he thinks sending someone to kidnap me and threaten me with torture and death is going to make me shiver, then he doesn't know me that well. On the other hand, I'd just love to be alone in a room with you right now. With me carving you a new smile on your scrawny throat while you choke on your last gasp of bloody air."

The agent lifted a hand, his expression gleeful. "Oh, I don't think so, sweetheart. I think you're going to do exactly what the boss wants you to. If you don't, you know that brand spanking new lab and all your nice little employees? The ones with families and loved ones depending on them?"

Despite herself, she nodded. She had a bad feeling about this. The agent moved closer until she could smell the stink of his sweat under the

sickly sweet cologne. He curled his fingers into a ball under her nose and suddenly splayed them open.

"Boom!"

"You sonofabitch." She leveled a look of pure hatred at him. Blackwell and this sleazebag were willing to commit mass murder just to get what they wanted. She realized that if they were this determined, she could pretty much expect herself to be dead when all of this is over.

Or worse. Baldy's plaything.

It was up to her now. Everything had always been. Just like before.

"Tell your boss I'll build the reactor. But if anyone else gets hurt, I will destroy him."

He smirked. "Yeah, right. What you gonna do? Bat your eyelashes? Pull the other one, darling, it's got bells on. *Jingle Bells come to think of it.*" He laughed and slammed the door shut behind him.

Rollie waited for him to leave before approaching the tools and materials on the table. She smiled slightly as she surveyed everything.

"Oh, it'll definitely be an early Christmas for me, buddy boy." she picked up a red container with danger labels all over it and went to work, whistling *Jingle Bells* as she did so.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the desert heat outside the secure building Rollie was being held in, Day and Edge carefully stayed out of sight of any of the bored-looking guards.

Day hit the last corner, crouching down with his shoulder against the brickwork as he peered around the corner. Never do the expected. Never look around a corner at head height, or you were apt to get it shot off.

"This is too easy, Edge. You sure you got the right place?"

"Yep, and don't ask me how I found out about this. You're gonna owe me more than one on this one, Vann. And don't believe what you see. If it looks easy, then it can only be a trap."

Day snorted, checking the safeties on his own weaponry again. "By

the time you're finished, I may as well have made a deal with the devil. What's this going to cost me?" he asked, checking around the corner again, his eyes narrowing as he checked targets. "Two x-rays. One half left, eleven o'clock. One quarter right at two. Which one do you want?"

"I'll take the right." Edge thumbed off his pistol's safety. "Then you move to cover down the way, and I'll cover your six. And do I look like I know everything? I'll collect when I need it. Right now, let's take care of this and bail your princess out." Edge got ready to roll out. Since they were coming in from the right, Day had to go first.

"You're a con artist," Day muttered, using another quick glance around the corner to set his aim. "By the time you call this in, the deal will have changed, and I'll owe you an arm and a leg. On three. One...two...three."

The two men exploded into action. Their movements were precise and economical, lethal and fast as they stormed the building. The two guards went down in seconds, the pfft-pfft of silenced rounds the only sound before the dull thump of bodies hitting the dirt.

Day hit the door at high-speed, shouldering it open and rolling through. The corridor beyond was empty. "We need to find her." He jerked a thumb toward the dead guards. "When Pinky and Perky out there get found, the shit'll hit the fan."

"It's these days I kinda miss doing what we used to do. Getting rid of the bodies during infil is a rookie's job," Edge complained. "If I were these guys and I was holding someone that could make a lot of noise, I'd stuff her in the basement, but not too far from a back exit in case I need to pull her out in a hurry."

"Agreed." Day nodded. "Okay, let's have a look at that plan again." He gesture for the cell phone Edge had produced earlier. His NSA pals had come up trumps. Not only had they tracked Rollie within a couple of hours, but they'd also managed a pull a plan of the building where she was held.

Edge pulled it from his back pocket and handed it over. He kept his eyes on the corridor as Day checked. "Okay. Northwest corridor then, stairs to the lower levels are back there."

He checked his magazine. "We need to double it. Sure you can handle the pace, old man?" he teased. Edge wasn't that much older than he was.

"Hey, I'm just keeping your pace, boy. Don't want you to trip and fall all over your own feet," Edge retorted. "You fall on your pansy ass and you crack something, you'd start crying, and then I'd have to shoot you just to keep you quiet."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rollie wasn't staying idle at all. She wasn't about to allow a scheming, greedy businessman like Blackwell have sole control over the world's solution to the energy crisis for his own agenda.

She found the surveillance cameras they left in the room and worked on developing her escape strategy away from their prying eyes. If the bad guys decided to stick a scientist desperate to escape in a workshop filled with prime raw materials, then they really couldn't be that smart, could they?

There was only one way to find out.

She took a wrench and began smashing the cameras one at a time. As she got herself ready, she heard a series of footsteps approaching the door. This was the moment of truth. She just hoped she got the calculations right, or this wouldn't be good news for her, either.

There was a heavy *thump* against the door, and then it burst inward as a body barreled through it. The guard hit the floor at Rollie's feet hard, unconscious or dead, but she had barely a second to notice as a second figure hurtled through the door.

Rollie swung up her hastily constructed compressed air slug gun and prepared to fire. The slug gun was based on a product her company developed for the police that fired rubberized slugs that would be enough to cause a lot of pain to incapacitate a target, but not kill.

However, this slug gun wouldn't be firing rubber bullets. Not that Rollie was thinking about incapacitation. All she could use as ammo were large ball bearings, and she was just fine with that. Given the size of the

barrel and pressure of the gas, the metal balls would most likely only cause serious pain and injury. She would have preferred a kill setting, but physics and a lack of materials prevented her from getting her wish.

Her finger tightened on the trigger, and half expecting her gun not to work, she was about to shoot when she saw who the second figure was. Time seemed to stop.

"Day?" she murmured, not quite believing her eyes.

He stopped, his hands spread to the sides, gun held loosely with its barrel pointed upward. "Rollie, sweetheart, it's me. Remember me? Saved your ass in that cabin?"

She heard him, but she didn't quite understand. She lowered her weapon but still kept staring at him, half expecting him to be just a hallucination of her lovesick, twisted mind.

"How...?"

"Oh, a brave and daring rescue of the damsel in distress, of course." His lips quirked in that crooked half smile she found so endearing, but as she studied him further, she could see the lines of strain around his mouth and eyes. She scanned him, noting the bulk of a bandage poking from the collar of the T-shirt under the body armor.

Realization came to her slowly, but as soon as it did, she smiled. But as soon as joy came, something else quickly followed. She swung back and socked him right in the jaw.

Day rolled with the punch, but it snapped his head back. He rubbed his jaw and frowned at her. "Er...mind telling me what that was for?"

"I thought you were dead, you jackass!"

She opened her mouth to say more, but she couldn't quite think of anything else, so she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly, burying her face into his solid chest. She couldn't help but cry. She held him so tight. She was afraid he wasn't really there, and to let him go would make him disappear.

"I thought you were dead," she mumbled into his chest.

"Hey, hey. Don't cry, angel. I'm harder to kill than that. I promise," he whispered, his lips against her hair as he gathered her closer into his

arms. It wasn't comfortable, thanks to the Kevlar, but she didn't care. Her bruised heart ached for what she thought had happened, and what might have been, even as it soared to realize she'd been wrong. Day wasn't dead. She had another chance.

A sound outside brought Day's head up sharply, and Rollie murmured in protest. Here in his arms, she felt safe, and it was a heady feeling.

His lips brushed her temple again. "Sorry to rush you, sweetheart, but we need to get you out of here." He let her go and starting to shrug out of the vest.

"No, you keep it on," said Rollie as she gave them both some distance and gripped her slug launcher tighter. "You're going to be the one at the front. You need it more."

## **Chapter Nine**

Day gritted his teeth. "You are, without doubt, the most frustrating woman on the planet," he told her, still stripping out of the vest and ignoring the pain in his shoulder. The pad would be soaked through soon, if it wasn't already, but it could wait. He had to get Rollie out of here first.

"Now, put the damn thing on." He growled as he shoved it into her arms. "Or I'll put it on you myself."

The gentle expression on her face quickly turned into hostility as her own anger sparked.

"You can try, buddy boy, and then you'll wish you were really dead." She threw it back at him. "You just got shot and you're in front. I can't think of anyone who'd need that thing more than you."

Day held out the vest. Fear for her coiled in his chest, and he wasn't the kind of man who was good at the hearts and flowers crap. "I can," he bit out. "The bloody, argumentative, pain-in-the-ass woman I'm in love with. Now, put the vest on...please."

For the second time in five minutes, Rollie had the same expression of shock on her face.

"What... What did you say?"

"He said for you to put the fucking vest on so we can get the hell out of here," Edge suddenly retorted from the door as he peered in. "We're supposed to be a rescue party. That doesn't quite work when everyone is dead because two geniuses were having a lover's quarrel over a goddamned vest." He spared a glance at the moaning figure on the

floor. "Either put him out my misery, or let's get a move on."

Day moved quickly, while Rollie still reeled from his statement and the appearance of Edge, and wrapped her in the vest. He smoothed the Velcro down her sides and kissed her. "I love you," he whispered, catching her gaze with his. "Now, let's get you out of here."

One of her hands firmly in his, he turned back to Edge, glowering as the other merc glanced toward their hands and opened his mouth. "Say it, and you're a dead man. You got a way out of here or wha—" He broke off as gunfire sounded outside. If he and Edge were in here... "What the fuck?"

"Reinforcements, but they're feds, so they could belong to anyone." Edge grinned and reached into a pocket, withdrawing a credit card and holding it out to Day. "I suggest you take the little lady there and get her a new name, then take her someplace hot. I'll find you when you're free and clear."

Rollie seemed to have recovered from Day's declaration of love because as fast as Day was, she managed to snatch the card from Edge before he could.

"I'll hang on to this," quipped Rollie. "You wouldn't want some airhead gym-bunny being in charge with this. He'd use it to buy light beer and reduced fat chips so he can keep his figure."

Edge grinned as he looked at them both. "Airhead. Vann, she's got you figured, so *don't* screw this up. Now, you two haul ass. Catch you on the flipside," he said and then he was gone through the door. His lean figure disappeared up the corridor as Rollie and Day emerged from the lab.

"This way. We got a truck out back." Day started up the corridor, his whole manner alert. They weren't out of the woods yet, and he wouldn't be comfortable until this place was in the rearview mirror.

Rollie followed him as they ran down the corridor. "Who was that?"

"Who was who?" Day asked over his shoulder as they turned the corner.

"You know, your friend back there?" She moved faster to keep up

with him. "The one whose generosity we're going to take full advantage of in a remote tropical paradise somewhere?"

"Oh. His name is Edge. He has other, less flattering names...ooph!" Day reeled back as a door slammed open and hit his shoulder hard. The pain radiated out through his body, and he staggered back, his pistol clattering to the floor. A heavyset figure stepped through the doorway, kicking his weapon out of reach.

"Well, well, what do we have here? The knight in shining armor? Oh no, that only works well in fairytales, doesn't it?" Morrow jeered, leveling his gun at Day's head.

Rollie raised her slug gun and pulled the trigger.

There was a loud pop and whoosh. The rubber slug struck the dirty agent right in his chest, throwing him back against the wall. He collapsed to the floor in a wheezing heap as he struggled to breathe. His gun clattered out of his reach.

"How does that feel, sunshine?" Rollie retorted as she approached and gave him a swift kick for good measure. "That was for landing a good one on me, you asshole."

"And this is from me." Day's voice sounded behind her, and Rollie turned to find him, gun in hand, calmly aiming at the fallen man. "Step out of the way, Rollie, and let me finish this."

She placed her hand over the top of the gun and gently pushed it down. "What would killing him accomplish? You're only going to end the suffering he deserves and stain your soul in the process. You're a good man, Dayton Vann. Don't let this define who you are." She smiled warmly at him. "Leave him, and let's go."

## Epilogue

The warm sun beat down onto white sand, the heat radiating from it even into the shadows under the porch of the single beach hut on this stretch of the bay. Day sighed in contentment, angling his head back to make the most of the breeze coming off the water.

He was draped comfortably in a hammock, one bare foot hanging down to rock it gently. Wearing only a pair of board shorts, it was obvious a month of sun and relaxation had healed up the gunshot wounds to his arm and shoulder. Only fading scars remained now.

The sound of movement inside the beach house registered, and he cracked an eyelid open. "You're awake."

Rollie reached up and stretched her whole body, catlike, before stepping out to the porch with him. Dressed in a red string bikini set underneath a sheer, gauzy shirt, with her wide-brimmed straw hat and dark sunglasses, she looked very much like a beach bunny. However, the three-inch stiletto sandals were for just his benefit.

"I wanted to stay in bed longer, but you weren't there." She smiled at him as she strutted toward the hammock and leaned in to share one of their frequent, passionate kisses.

"You snore. Had to come out here to get any rest at all," he teased, grabbing her wrist and pulling her down into his lap in one smooth move. He stroked her cheek with his fingertips as he placed a kiss on her lips. Soft and gentle, quite at odds with the heated lust coursing through his body. "Because there's this little minx in the bedroom at night. Insatiable,

she is. Won't let a poor guy alone."

"I don't remember you putting up much of a resistance, and as I recall, you were pretty much using each and every physical contact we had yesterday as a prelude." She gave him a slow kiss and then nibbled on his lower lip.

She pulled back, bit her own lip, and smiled coyly at him while walking her fingers up his chest. "Though, can you really blame me? I had been missing out for more than two decades. It was about damned time I caught up. And with such a willing instructor, what more could I ask for?"

Day grinned and caught her fingers, bringing them up to his lips so he could kiss them one by one. "Well, you have been a very enthusiastic student, but I think a test is called for."

The sound of the TV inside the hut filtered out to them.

"...employees of Blackwell Industries as well as a number of FBI Agents were indicted today on charges of murder, kidnapping, and treason. Among those charged is George Blackwell, chairman and CEO of Blackwell Industries, who has since been admitted to Mercy Hospital following a severe stroke after news of his involvement with the Gavilan Kidnapping case was uncovered by Federal Authorities. Meanwhile, Blackwell Industries' stock continues to plummet following the massive criminal actions filed against the officers of the company.

In other news, Gavilan Technologies Corporation has promised close cooperation with the world governments for the rapid development and mass production of the revolutionary photon reactor technology, which was unveiled under unusual circumstances.

It was reported earlier this week that Doctor Caroline Gavilan had been fatally wounded in a shooting outside her company's headquarters. However, it was revealed later by sources within the FBI that the real Caroline Gavilan had been kidnapped by unknown parties. The identity of the shooting victim has been revealed as Ms. Marie Deline, Dr. Gavilan's close friend and the CEO of GTC. Gavilan Technologies spokesperson Bryan Westwood clarified the circumstances behind the aliases and the hidden identities earlier today during a press conference.

Various news agencies have been attempting to contact the real Doctor Gavilan for a comment, especially with rumors of a Nobel Prize nomination for her photon reactor development, but her office has informed us that the famous inventor is currently unavailable for comment."

Day lifted his head, catching the last line of the broadcast and smiled. "Definitely unavailable for comment," he said as he kissed her palm. "Unless they can decipher screams of pleasure, that is."

"Oh, you are so right," murmured Rollie before her hand came around and clamped down around his wrist—and quickly cuffed him to the hammock pole before he could do anything about it. "I told you I'd get even with you with these things. Now I get to call the shots."

Day jerked in surprise and looked up at her, the cuffs on his wrist jingling. His surprise evaporated into hunger as desire shot through his veins like a bullet. "Minx," he told her and stretched out, inviting her touch. "I did tell you I love you, didn't I, *Mrs. Vann*?"

Rollie stared at him in surprise. "Wow. I cuff you to a pole and you wanna get married. I can't wait to see what I get when I tie you to the bed."

But her playful nature sobered a bit as she continued. "Not as often as I tell you that I love you, Mr. Vann. I always will, forever and ever.

"And in case you didn't quite get that, yes, I will marry you."

The End

### **Author Bio**

Long time friends, Mina and Evey, have always enjoyed writing together. For many years they restrained their writing activities on online writing circles and role-play, but it wasn't long before their myriad of characters and stories grew too large to be contained. Wanting the freedom to write their worlds and stories, they branched out into fiction, and a monster was created. Although writing activity is confined to the witching hour for one or the other due to the time zones the two currently reside in, they can usually be found working on or plotting yet another story.

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