



What happens in Atlantic City...changes everything.

Karmic Consultants, Book 4

The “gift” that makes Ciara Liung the FBI’s prized secret weapon makes her existence more like a curse. Unable to bear human contact, she lives as a hermit, immersing herself in the water that gives her peace and amplifies her power.

Her new FBI handler, though, only believes what he can see. The problem? Her gift—the ability to psychically locate stolen jewels—only works in the nude.

Special Agent Nathan Smith can’t believe he’s expected to babysit some psychic finder. Psychic...right. An undercover op gone wrong may have left him a desk jockey—and Ciara’s charms are more distracting than he cares to admit—but he’s a field agent at heart. She’s working some kind of angle. It’s just a matter of time before he unravels it.

Sent to Atlantic City to recover a ruby necklace for Monaco’s royal family, both finder and Fed are pushed outside their comfort zones, and discover more than they ever believed possible. And when a trap is sprung, they realize they stand to lose much more than a sparkly stone...

Warning: This book contains gambling, go-go dancers, public indecency, and every brand of trouble a troubled psychic can get into in America’s Playground.

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The Naked Detective

Vivi Andrews

Dedication

To Betsy, with thanks for a fabulous “research” weekend in Atlantic City. To Leslie & Craig (who won this dedication in a game of Sheepshead) for being rock stars even if they do force me to do manual labor every time I visit. And to the rest of the Northwestern crowd—Leigh, Brian, Dave, Keyvan & Christine—who once a year remind me how awesome it is to be an incurable nerd. Y’all are the best. (Go Cats!)

Prologue—Public Indecency, the Gift that Keeps On Giving

Ciara Liung was not, habitually, the kind of girl who leapt buck naked into the dunk tank at the Atlantic City pier at two o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon, in full view of horrified mommies, pubescent acne-covered ring-toss attendants and one very pissed-off federal agent.

But there was a first time for everything.

Ciara ducked behind the Plexiglas tank to whip her dress off over her head—no sense giving the teenage carnies any more of a thrill than absolutely necessary. Giving Junior his first public stiffy was not high on her list of priorities. She hunched down behind the dubious shield of the transparent tank and slipped out of her underwear, shivering a little even though it was in the mid-eighties and humid as hell.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. And public indecency.

She clambered up onto the platform above the dunk tank and bent at the waist with her arms wrapped around her chest in an attempt to keep the show PG-13.

By the time the tourists in the arcade—and Special Agent Nathan Smith of the Federal Bureau of Investigating Assholes—realized Ciara was about to have her own private skinny-dipping session, it was too late to stop her.

The water beneath her had a slightly brown, used-dishwater look to it. Not exactly sanitary, but beggars couldn't be choosers. It was water. That was good enough.

Just before she took the plunge, Ciara glanced up. Her gaze locked on Nate Smith's angry brown eyes.

The combination of blond hair and melty-chocolate brown eyes on a man had always made Ciara's insteps turn to mush, but Nate's eyes didn't look like melty chocolate at the moment. More like he was channeling Satan's henchmen.

He was tall enough to see over the crowd as he shouldered his way through, but he couldn't move very quickly. He seemed so capable, such a big strong take-charge man, that Ciara had often forgotten over the last few days why he moved so deliberately. The limp and the cane were actually pretty damn sexy, in a *House, M.D.* kind of way. And Nate had the House trademark take-no-shit-from-anybody assholeness down pat.

If Dr. House were a fallen-angel-gorgeous federal agent with a chip on his shoulder the size of Quantico, he'd look just like Nate Smith.

He really didn't have any right to look so pissed off. He'd practically told her to do this. She wouldn't even be in Atlantic City if not for him.

Nate plowed across the distance between them as fast as his limp would allow him. "Ciara, don't you da—"

She dropped into the water. As soon as it closed over her head, the entire world washed away. Nate's anger, the arcade, everything vanished into insignificance in that peaceful cocoon, the static of her daily life muted.

Her hair swirled loose in the water around her. Ciara closed her eyes and pictured the necklace. The water did what it always did, acting as a catalyst and engaging her gift. In a flickering montage behind her eyelids, she saw the sparkling glass high-rise of the Borgata Hotel & Casino, a plush living room with cream-colored sofas, a woman in a bright pink bustier and hot pants with silver eyelashes and a long pink ponytail, a small silver safe sitting on the floor of a closet...

Then Nate's hand closed over her arm and the vision incinerated. From one second to the next, the water turned from cool aqua-perfection into molten lava. His hand felt like liquid nitrogen, the touch of it cold enough to burn through her skin instantly. Ciara tried to block out the pain, tried to focus on the necklace, but the contact seared through her senses. She screamed against the burn, and water rushed into her mouth.

Beneath the smothering blanket of pain, a small piece of her consciousness tried to command her legs to kick her toward the surface, to push off the walls of the tank, to do *something*, but her body refused to do anything other than contort and writhe in the lava bath.

She was going to drown in four feet of brackish water inside a Plexiglas box.

Naked. In public. With crowds of gaping tourists gathering around. If she hadn't been snorting dishwasher up her nose, she would have gone all *Gladiator* and asked them if they were not entertained.

The spectacle was a bizarrely fitting end. Death at a carnival. Like the sideshow freak she was.

Her vision began to go fuzzy, blurring around the edges, and an eerie calm settled over her thoughts.

The lost girl, finder of all things lost, went out into the world looking for life and found death. There was an odd sort of poetry in that. Macabre as all hell, but poignant in its own way.

The freezer-burn hand on her arm gave a sharp jerk.

Poor Agent Smith. He got shot, yanked off his dream assignment, and now she died on his watch. The poor guy just couldn't catch a break.

Of course, if the idiotic man had only listened to her in the first place, none of this would have happened. It was a sad state of affairs when a girl had to drown herself to prove her innocence.

Yep, her death was his fault. The bastard. He clearly owed her an apology and she fully intended to collect.

Just as soon as she grew gills.

Chapter One—Clothing Optional Jewel Thief

Four days earlier...

Special Agent Nate Smith glared at the cozy ranch-style house on Honeydew Circle. It looked as innocuous as every other cookie-cutter cottage on the cul-de-sac. On the surface, there was no sign that the resident of 1134 Honeydew Circle was linked to eighty-five of the last hundred major jewelry thefts in the United States.

An abandoned tricycle and a beat-up basketball littered the neighboring yard. Across the street, a minivan waited in the driveway for the carpool hour.

Nate limped up the flower-lined front walk, pushing through the now-familiar pain in his left thigh.

The crooks were moving to the suburbs and making themselves at home. Bad enough that criminals flaunted their ill-gotten gains in high-rise hotels and plush mansions. Did they have to infiltrate sweet little neighborhoods like this one too? Was nothing sacred?

Honeydew Circle was exactly the kind of street he could see himself settling down on someday. Provided he ever got off his ass and went out with one of the “nice girls” his mother delighted in throwing at him. If he was honest, part of him was glad his mom was so determined to find him Miss Right. He sure as hell wasn’t going to meet a nice girl on the job. Especially not in his new assignment handling the Jewelry and Gemstone program’s top informant.

Ciara Liung was not a nice girl. He’d bet his badge on it.

No one had the kind of information this woman had without being dirty through and through. No matter what kind of supernatural bullshit they tried to pass that knowledge off as.

A psychic jewel finder.

Nate snorted to himself. What kind of fool did they take him for? The location of stolen gems didn’t magically appear to anyone. Hell, Jesus himself wasn’t that connected with the universe. Cure the lepers, no problem. Find four hundred and seventy million dollars in stolen gems over the course of three years? Not likely.

There was only one rational conclusion. Ms. Ciara Liung, the JAG program’s secret weapon, was a crook.

Nate didn’t care what the Bureau policy was about flipping crooks for the greater good. He’d already learned his lesson about trusting criminals with pretensions of virtue. He tightened his grip on the cane, the burn in his thigh a constant reminder.

Nate pressed the doorbell, listening to the chimes echoing cheerfully inside the house.

Saturday afternoon. Miss Liung wouldn't be expecting him.

He could have waited until Monday. He'd been cleared for duty this morning, but his superiors didn't expect him to report for work for a few more days. Since the bullet had ripped through the muscle in his thigh and turned him into a desk jockey, he was technically a nine-to-fiver, but giving him a cushy handler assignment didn't make him domesticated. He lived the job, twenty-four-seven, and that wasn't going to change. If he caught Ciara Liung off-guard, he had a better shot of catching her in her lies.

Provided she ever opened the damn door.

She had to be home. He'd been itching to get back in the game for weeks. He'd go crazy if he had to wait another day.

Nate leaned on the doorbell, keeping up a steady ringing until a feminine voice yelled, "Knock it off! I'm coming already."

The door swung open.

Christ on crutches, it's Lucy Liu.

The petite Asian woman stood in the doorway wearing nothing but a towel. Water dripped from the tips of her long black hair to puddle on the tile at her feet. Every edible inch of her creamy white skin was on display. She crossed her arms beneath her breasts in a way that made the towel's hold on them seem tantalizingly precarious.

"Can I help you?"

Can you ever. Nate pulled his eyes up from the wet cleavage and focused on her fine-boned face. Her lips were pursed in a kissable bow. Up-tilted black eyes met his without wavering. Her direct gaze wasn't what he expected from someone who made her living by lying and stealing, but he knew better than to trust a pretty pair of eyes.

Kissable? Edible? Where the hell was his brain? She was a person of interest in eighty-five federal investigations. This was no time to be thinking with his dick. Even if she was the spitting image of Lucy Liu.

"Ciara Liung?" Nate flipped out his ID. He straightened to his most imposing federal posture. "Special Agent Nate Smith, FBI. I'm your new handler."

Ciara looked up at six-plus feet of chiseled federal agent on her doorstep. Her first instinct was to say he could *handle* her anytime.

Unfortunately, there were two flaws with the blatant flirtation tactic.

One: the tall blond man standing on her doorstep with his George Clooney-cleft chin and grim, chocolate-brown eyes looked like he was all business. Mr. Professional. He probably wouldn't be amused by her amateur attempt to talk dirty.

Two, and more importantly, the kind of *handling* she had in mind definitely involved touching, and the psychic feedback from her gift—or curse, depending on how you spun it—made human contact excruciating.

Which was just fine and dandy. Ciara was perfectly content being untouchable. Happy, almost. It was amazing what you could adjust to when you had no choice. She'd lived without skin-to-skin contact for long enough that she'd resigned herself to that reality, steering clear of temptation.

Until Agent Testosterone came banging on her door, tromping all over her happy resignation with his big sexy pheromones and making her wish she was a touchable kind of girl.

As if wishing ever changed anything.

"What happened to Agent Cranson?" She liked her old handler. Portly, grandfatherly Agent Cranson, who never upset the status quo.

"Retired," Agent Sexy-Pants answered curtly.

Her hormones didn't appear to care that he had the verbal skills of a caveman. Her little heart went pitter-pat without any input from the logical part of her brain. The man was seriously gorgeous.

Ciara had a sudden empathy for all those male-female crime-solving duos on television, forced to endure season after season of unrequited sexual tension, fated never to get it on, because as soon as they did the show would be cancelled faster than you could say *Moonlighting*.

She visualized her relationship with Special Agent Nate Smith stretching out into the future. Tension-filled silences, longing gazes and moments fraught with secret lust. What a nightmare.

"You could have just called to introduce yourself." Agent Smith couldn't possibly exude as many pheromones over the phone as he did in person. Keeping a nice, healthy distance seemed like a genius idea. She should get a McCarthy Grant for thinking of it. "Cranson never made house calls. That system worked fine and if it ain't broke..."

"Things are going to work a bit differently now," Agent Smith said, stomping her happy little daydreams of what she would do with all that Genius Grant money into daydream pulp. "I'm not Cranson."

She couldn't argue with that statement. She doubted easygoing Cranson had a single chromosome in common with the blond devil looming on her doorstep, looking at her like she'd just confessed to drowning kittens.

Wait a second. Ciara frowned. Something wasn't adding up. Agent Smith wasn't looking at her like a federal agent ought to look at a valuable theft-stopping asset. He looked like he thought *she* was the thief. Or a phony.

"What exactly have you been told about what I do?" she asked cautiously.

"We give you the description of a stolen item and you locate it. By *magic*." His expression didn't alter at all, but she got the sense he was sneering at her behind his blank mask.

Ciara's stomach made a swan dive toward her toes as realization hit. Great. Just great. Her new handler was a nonbeliever. Wasn't that going to be fun?

So much for the pheremoney goodness his cleft chin inspired. The last thing she needed was to pin her touchy-feely fantasies—no matter how pointless—on a dickwad fed who didn't know how to respect the badassness of her abilities.

Her affinity for lost and stolen objects was the *one* thing that was good about her gift. If he didn't respect that, he didn't respect her. And she had no time for men who didn't respect her. One phone call to her boss and she could get herself a brand new handler who wasn't a complete non-believing douchebag.

Ciara should just slam the door in his face and call Karma to have him replaced, but something stopped her. Probably the fact that he was so damn pretty. How often did she get to drool over thoroughly drool-worthy federal agents? If he'd been ugly, she could have kicked him to the curb without a second thought. Double-standard, thy name is libido.

"It isn't magic," she heard herself explaining. "There are no spells involved. It's just a gift. Ever since I was fifteen, I've had this weird ability to find lost and stolen things." And a complete inability to maintain physical contact with another human being.

"Was Cranson in on it? Or was he just that gullible?"

"Cranson was my handler. He would call me with descriptions of lost items," Ciara said, confused. Hadn't they just gone over this?

Agent Studly nodded slowly, his serious brown gaze locked steadily on her. "Do you steal the jewels yourself and turn them in to the FBI for the insurance reward money? Or are you working with a fence, turning the gems he can't unload over to us in exchange for the appearance of virtue and a little finder's fee?"

Ciara coughed with laughter. He couldn't be serious. When an ominous frown started to darken his brow, she couldn't help it. She burst out laughing.

Ciara raked her eyes over the too-sexy-to-be-believed "Federal Agent" on her doorstep. She should have known. Feds didn't come that hot and her FBI liaison didn't make house calls.

Her boss had sent her a stripper.

"Agent Smith?" Ciara snickered helplessly. "God, I can't believe I fell for that. Like the *Matrix*. Who came up with that? Was it Jo?" She wiped tears of laughter from her eyes. "You're the *Matrix* dude." Only about a thousand times hotter.

"Agent Smith" narrowed his eyes. "Yes. I'm the *Matrix* dude. Except I'm not a machine and I'm not fictional. Other than that, we may as well be the same person."

"And a smartass too," Ciara said, delighted, getting into the game. "But how can you be sure you aren't a machine? What if you were one and didn't know it, like in the last Terminator movie? You could be a badass killing machine sent back from the future to destroy me and you wouldn't even know it."

He frowned at her repressively. “I think you missed the part where I said I wasn’t fictional.”

She shrugged. “Most of the people I meet are fictional.” It was an unfortunate byproduct of having her social life dictated by her Netflix queue. “Who sent you?” She giggled, not even bothering to keep a straight face. “It was Karma, wasn’t it? I know I whine about feeling isolated sometimes, but this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

“The Federal Bureau of Investigation sent me,” he said with laser precision.

Ciara lost it. She collapsed against the doorjamb, laughing helplessly.

A pair of young mothers pushing strollers along the sidewalk looked over to see what the commotion was. Ciara waved at them cheerily, feeling none of her usual jealousy over their normal, touchable life. Until Agent Smith shifted his big shoulders to block her view.

“Perhaps we should continue this conversation inside,” he said icily, his gaze shifting pointedly downward.

Two realizations hit simultaneously and blood rushed to Ciara’s face. One, she was still wearing only a towel. And two, Special Agent Nate Smith of the FBI was no stripper.

Chapter Two—What Would Grace Kelly Do?

“Karma?” Ciara huddled beside the window with the phone pressed to her ear, peeking out at the federal agent still camped on her doorstep.

“Ciara.” Her boss’s voice, usually so unflappable, sounded distracted and harried. “We found the dress. Brittany’s back, so we’re good. Thanks for looking.”

Ciara kicked herself. She’d completely forgotten the wedding dress she’d been tracing when Agent Smith started ringing her doorbell like the salesman from hell. It was a good thing Karma’d found it, since Ciara hadn’t had time to see a damn thing.

Then she realized Karma was about to disconnect the call. Her panic spiked. “Karma, don’t hang up!”

“What’s wrong?” Her boss immediately shifted into crisis calm. “Are you okay? Do I need to send someone over there?” Ciara felt Karma’s attention lock down around her like a physical presence, firm and comforting.

“I’m fine.” A sheepish squirming started in her stomach in response to the crisis tone. This wasn’t nuclear-warheads-headed-toward-Manhattan level catastrophe. She just had a small personality conflict with Agent Smith, who thought she was a felon. She could handle it. Couldn’t she? “There’s already someone here, actually. The FBI sent me a new handler.”

After a millisecond pause, Karma said, “What’s wrong with him?”

Trust her boss not to beat around the bush. “He doesn’t believe my abilities are real. He thinks I’m in cahoots with some fence or something. Stealing jewels and then turning them over to the FBI for reward money.”

“Shit.”

Ciara gaped at the phone. She didn’t think she’d ever heard of Karma losing her calm enough to swear. “Karma?”

“Does he have a warrant?”

“To search the place? He isn’t going to find anything here.”

“For your arrest, Ciara,” Karma corrected. “Does he have a warrant for you?”

Fear slithered down her spine. He couldn’t actually arrest her, could he? Someone with her limitations couldn’t do prison. “I don’t think so. He probably wouldn’t have let me slam the door in his face if he had a warrant.”

“Good girl.” She could hear Karma’s smile.

“I think at this point he’s just skeptical.”

Someone shouted something on Karma’s end and then her voice came out muffled like she was holding her hand over the phone. “Tell the minister Lucy’ll be ready in five, Jo. I’ll be right there.”

The pieces snapped into place—the dress, the minister—and Ciara’s sheepishness escalated to full-blown mortification. “You’re at your brother’s wedding, aren’t you? Oh crap, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have called. It’s nothing.”

“No, Ciara. You should always call. Whenever you need anything. You know that.”

“Go watch your brother get married. I’m fine. I’m great, actually. The fed’s totally doable—er, tolerable. I can manage him. Give the happy couple my best, would you?”

“I will. But, Ciara, I don’t think you should deal with this guy anymore. I’ll contact his superiors on Monday and make sure you get a new handler, but in the meantime, steer clear, okay? And call me if you have any problems. Even if it’s in the middle of the ceremony.”

“Will do, boss,” Ciara lied. “You have fun.”

She thumbed the off button on the phone and tossed it on the couch. Wrapping her towel more tightly around herself, she leaned over to peek out the front windows.

Agent Smith, cyborg asshole, stood on her doorstep, completely unaware that she’d just made the call that would get him kicked off her detail.

Karma had said to steer clear, but Agent Smith didn’t look like he was going anywhere. She had to open the door to tell him he was history, didn’t she?

He probably wouldn’t believe her. He didn’t seem like the type who took much on faith.

Ciara rushed to the bedroom and grabbed a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

She wasn’t ready to face Agent Smith again just yet. He was too...something. Too big. Too skeptical. Too serious.

And he was watching her too closely. From the second she’d first opened the door, he hadn’t taken his eyes off her. Sure, it was because he thought she was a criminal, but Ciara wasn’t used to that kind of focused intensity. It was kinda hot.

To say she didn’t get out much was the understatement of the year. If a stranger bumped into her on the street and their skin brushed, it felt like a firecracker exploded in her brain. The more she tried to brace for it and block against it, the worse it seemed to be. When it was really bad, she couldn’t even stay on her feet, and then, of course, all the good Samaritans rushed over to touch her to make sure she was okay, setting off more explosions until the inside of her head felt like the Fourth of July.

So Ciara didn’t leave the house much. Or ever, really. Her groceries were delivered. Delivery people didn’t tend to be touchers. They respected her distance. Between the internet and her DVR, she had all the entertainment she could possibly ask for.

So what if she didn't have real human contact? Who did these days? Wasn't that what everyone was always bitching about on *Oprah* and *The Today Show*? How technology had disconnected them from real human interaction?

Well, technology was the only way Ciara *could* interact, so she made the most of it. She watched movies and TV shows and read at least five books a week, unashamed to be living vicariously through them. At least she was living.

But then Agent Smith had to show up, with his intense stare and his cleft chin, making her feel like her life had been thrown under a microscope. Making her feel uncomfortable and nervous...and yet somehow, strangely, infinitely more *alive*.

Over the last decade she'd gotten good at telling herself she didn't need adventure or excitement. But if that was true, why did she get such a thrill out of just standing on her front step *talking* to Nate Smith?

Ciara tugged on the hip-hugging jeans and well-worn T. The psychic static of the fabric against her skin was so familiar it faded into background noise. She touched her lips with a finger, mourning the fact that she didn't own so much as a tube of lip gloss.

She could pretend she was going back out there to tell him to piss off, but she'd never been very good at lying to herself. Her life had gotten too safe. The risk he represented drew her almost as strongly as the man himself. Six feet of delicious temptation.

Ciara closed her eyes, counted to ten, and then slowly opened them. She tipped back her chin, bracing herself for another round of that awkward, delicious microscope feeling.

Just another day at the office.

Nate stood on the doorstep, calling himself twenty different kinds of fool.

He'd tipped his hand too early and scared her off. What kind of a dumbass, rookie move was that? He deserved the door slammed in his face. How was he supposed to interrogate her if she wouldn't even talk to him?

When the door to 1134 Honeydew Circle creaked open a second time, Nate held himself perfectly still, suppressing the urge to shove his foot in the door and trying to look harmless as Ciara Liung's up-tilted black eyes peered out at him.

"I'm sorry," he said, before she could speak. "I shouldn't have accused you. That was uncalled for. I just don't understand any of this." He waved his hands in a broad gesture to encompass all the *this* he didn't understand, going for baffled rather than condemnatory.

Her eyes narrowed, but she opened the door a little farther and angled her shoulders into the opening. He was not disappointed she'd gotten dressed. He *wasn't*.

"You're sorry?"

“Abjectly.” He widened his eyes, hoping the expression made him look penitent, and flashed his most earnest smile. “Can I come in? I’d like to understand.”

Ciara glanced over her shoulder into the house, as if gauging whether he was trustworthy enough to be allowed into the inner sanctum.

Nate mentally ran through his playbook. He needed to establish a sense of connection with the subject. Reaching out, he placed his hand over hers on the doorjamb.

She cried out, jerking her hand out from beneath his and cradling it to her chest, hissing in pain like he’d thrown acid in her face. “Don’t do that! You can’t touch me. No one can touch me.”

Ciara Liung was a hell of an actress, but Nate kept his skepticism to himself. He assumed an expression of utter contrition. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. Are you all right? Let me see.”

She shook her head, shying away from him. “No. It’s nothing. I’m fine now. I just... Don’t touch my skin, okay?”

Something about the expression on her face seemed familiar. She looked guarded. Defensive. It was exactly how he felt whenever someone looked at him like a cripple.

Nate wasn’t above exploiting every angle.

He lurched slightly to the side, steadying himself with his cane and making sure Ciara’s eyes flicked down to see his white-knuckled grip. She opened her mouth, and he could see her about to ask what had happened to him. He let every drop of icy pride he had show on his face and watched her words freeze in her throat.

“Come on in,” she said, swinging the door open wide and turning away, pointedly ignoring his unsteadiness, as if crippled FBI agents were a dime a dozen.

Nate gimped forward. On his best day, the limp was noticeable, but right now he played up his new disability to the max. He hobbled after her into the living room.

Then he took one look around and froze.

Nate was drooling, but if there was a time when drool was called for, this was it.

Seventy-two-inch plasma flat screen. Bose stereo surround sound. Mammoth Barcalounger, big enough to dwarf even his own substantial frame. And to top it all off, the woman had the single most impressive DVD collection he’d ever seen in his life. She made Blockbuster look poorly stocked.

This wasn’t a living room. This was Heaven.

He ran a finger along the titles lining the closest of the floor-to-ceiling shelves. The yellow spine of one case caught his eye. *To Catch a Thief*. Well, wasn’t that fitting? Nate snagged the Hitchcock masterpiece off the shelf and turned it over. Grace Kelly gazed up at him with a beguiling combination of sensual knowledge and naïveté.

“They don’t make ’em like that anymore, do they?”

Nate looked up to find Ciara watching him. She leaned against the arm of the Barcalounger, tight jeans and a snug T-shirt molding to every curve.

Nate started to drool for a whole new reason, then sharply reminded himself that she was a suspect, a criminal—or at the very least an accomplice. His drool was reserved for the pious women his mother found for him—which didn't sound like nearly as much fun, but he was no James Bond. He didn't bed the bad girls before sending them away for life.

Ciara fidgeted, twisting her fingers. He belatedly realized she was waiting for a response, but he couldn't remember what she'd asked him. Something about the movie? Where the hell was his brain? He'd been out of the game for a while, but he was a professional. He'd been at this too long to be tripped up by a pretty face with a killer movie collection.

He nodded toward the shelves that lined every wall. "You've got more movies than God."

She flashed an impish grin. "Well, you know, He's a busy dude. I've got more time to watch them."

Nate stilled. If he didn't know better, he'd think Ciara Liung was flirting with him. Hope kindled. Maybe he hadn't completely ruined his chances to nail her—in the legal sense. If he could get her talking about her so-called magic process and trip her up somehow, he'd have a tidy little confession from Miss Ciara Liung in no time.

Nate settled onto the couch, propping his cane in front of him and doing his best to look mild and nonthreatening. "So the touching thing..."

Ciara sighed and dropped onto the arm of the Barcalounger. "It's kinda like Rogue, from *X-Men*. Only in reverse. When people touch my skin, it hurts me."

"Is that part of the finding stuff?"

"Sort of. It's a side effect. I have an affinity for lost or stolen objects. I can *see* them, but anything touching my skin is like psychic static on the picture. Normally, I can ignore it, tune it out, but water is my catalyst. It amplifies everything. I can see so much more crisply when I'm in the water, but the touch of anything on my skin is excruciating."

"So..."

"I work naked," she said flatly.

His brain helpfully conjured images of Ciara *working*. Nate ignored them. Mostly. "You have to admit that's awfully convenient."

Her eyebrows flew up, a small smile quirking her mouth. "Actually, it's extremely inconvenient."

"Someone steals some jewels. The FBI comes to you to find them. You disappear and reappear with the location of the jewels. No one can watch you work because you have to work naked. You always find what you're looking for. You always walk away with the insurance company's reward money, but we never catch the thieves who stole the gems in the first place. That's very suspicious, Ms. Liung. If someone tried to sell you that story, wouldn't you wonder if they were running an elaborate con?"

She met his eyes squarely. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“You want me to believe you’ve solved eighty-five robberies in the last three years because you’re psychic, but only when you’re naked? Are you even listening to yourself?”

“It doesn’t really matter what you believe. You won’t be working with me long enough to matter.” Her smile turned smug.

She looked like she was *enjoying* herself. Not exactly part of his plan. He’d hoped to discomfit her, but if she was having fun, maybe she’d be more chatty.

Nate had been assigned to her detail until retirement, but he didn’t contradict her. Instead, he tried for a smile. “I’m easy to convince,” he said. “All you have to do is show me.”

She laughed. “I’m not going to strip for you, Agent Smith. No matter how many kinky fantasies you want to live out.”

He held up *To Catch a Thief*, showing her Grace Kelly oozing perfection on the cover. “What if I told you her necklace had been stolen?”

She arched an eyebrow. “That’s pretty much the premise of the movie. She thinks Cary Grant did it, only Cary Grant didn’t do it, but now he has to help her figure out who did do it or he’ll take the fall for it. I’m really feeling for Cary Grant at the moment.”

“I’m not talking about the movie. Princess Grace. The Heart of Monaco. It’s the necklace Prince Albert gave her on their wedding day. It’s been stolen. The government of Monaco has reason to believe the thieves will try to fence it in the U.S., so the FBI has been called in to assist in the investigation.” Nate studied her face, looking for telling signs of greed, eagerness or reluctance, but all he saw there was a little quirk of a smile with just the right dash of naughtiness. Which did not turn him on. He refused to be turned on by a suspect. “I’m supposed to ask you to find it.”

“You’re supposed to, but...what? You don’t want me to?”

“The government of Monaco would certainly like it back, but let’s just cut the crap, Miss Liung. You and I both know you aren’t psychic. Just give me the name of the fence you’re working with. I’ll see what I can do about mitigating the charges against you. Just confess...or get naked. Your choice.”

Ciara bit her lip. He could see her thoughts racing behind her dark eyes. Nate smiled internally.

If she started stripping to prove her innocence, he might have to believe his luck had changed. Blown cover, shot in the leg, blood infection, permanent muscle damage—his life had sucked lately. A Chinese-American fantasy giving him a private striptease would be a hell of a way to reverse his fortunes.

Any moment now she’d admit it was all a scam. She’d lead him straight to whoever was behind the robberies. In a matter of days he would go from being the pitiable cripple relegated to working a desk to being the Bureau hero responsible for bringing down a major jewelry theft ring. Visions of commendations and promotions danced in his head. He would prove that he wasn’t just some poor schmuck with only one leg who wasn’t good for anything anymore. He’d get his goddamn dignity back. Just as soon as little Miss

Ciara Liung acknowledged the impossible was really impossible. She wasn't a psychic. She was working both sides.

Eighty-five cases in the last three years. The thieves always got away, but the feds always got the goods back. Nate wasn't sure what kind of angle Ciara was working. He didn't know why any thief would go to the effort to steal something, only to turn it over to federal custody before it could be fenced, but he was damn sure going to find out.

He might be stuck behind a desk, but he wasn't a sucker.

And any second now she was going to prove him right.

Chapter Three—Bubble Girl on Tour

Confess...or get naked. If only he'd meant that in a less crime-and-punishment way.

Ciara wet her lips. Confession wasn't an option. She didn't have anything to confess to. She could wait him out—he couldn't possibly have any evidence against her, and Karma would get him yanked off her detail first thing Monday morning—but there was a chance whoever had Princess Grace's necklace would take it out of the country and away from the FBI's jurisdiction if she waited until her next handler was assigned to find it.

Which left getting naked.

And what's behind door number three, Vanna?

She could always try a trace clothed. The fabric against her skin would be distracting, a static dissonance she'd have to try to work through, but if the alternative was going full frontal in front of Agent Smith, she'd rather deal with the extra noise.

Ciara stood. "Let's get on with the floorshow, shall we?"

Ciara's pool was about as close to heaven as life on earth got. The renovations had been brutally expensive, but this room was her office and her sanctuary. Floating in that pool was the one time the static noise of the rest of the world disappeared.

Blue and white tiles swirled in an artistic pattern on the curved walls. The tiles on the floor were a pristine white and the pool itself was tiled a deep midnight blue. A skylight directly above the pool filled the room with natural light. The overall effect was soothing and vaguely Turkish.

"Nice," Agent Smith commented, leaning against the wall. He looked so smug, so certain she was about to break down and confess.

Ciara couldn't wait to wipe that smugness off his face. She stepped down on the first step leading into the pool, water lapping around her ankles and soaking the bottom of her jeans. She could have stripped down to her underwear, but she wanted to keep as much of her armor on as she could as a defense against Agent Smith's microscope eyes.

"Satan reserves a special spot in hell for Peeping Toms," she said cheerfully, as she stepped farther into the pool, the water calm and warm around her hips.

He just smiled—and damned if that quirk of his lips didn't make her feel warm all over.

She glided deeper until the water lapped at her rib cage and wet the fabric beneath her breasts. She kept her eyes down, pointedly ignoring him, but she felt his gaze on her like a physical touch, a weight on her skin.

Ciara wasn't used to company. No one else had even entered this room since the renovations were completed. She also wasn't used to swimming with clothes on. She'd forgotten just how loud the psychic dissonance was.

She took a deep breath, preparing to submerge, and then realized with a jolt that she didn't know what the hell she was supposed to be looking for. Five minutes with Agent McDreamy and she forgot how to do the most basic parts of her job.

Ciara forced herself to look up and meet his eyes. She immediately regretted it.

He was staring at her like she was a coed at a wet T-shirt contest—and she liked it entirely too much. She ought to be offended by the way his eyes were locked on her breasts, but instead she felt her nipples peaking, pushing against the damp fabric of her shirt. The intense fixation he had for her breasts was thrilling. No matter how loudly her internal feminist shrieked that she ought to feel demeaned and insulted, Ciara just felt womanly and sensual.

She cleared her throat, telling herself she was absolutely *not* sorry when his eyes left her breasts and made their way up to her eyes.

"I could sue you for sexual harassment." God, was that her voice? That breathy murmur?

"After you brought me back here and walked into your pool of your own free will? Good luck with that."

Damn. Did he have to be right? "Can you describe the necklace?"

He waved toward his own neck, as if the necklace were hanging there. "Fifty-carat heart-shaped Burmese ruby set in a choker surrounded by over a hundred and sixty carats of diamonds."

"Jesus. That's a big ruby. What's a rock like that go for these days?"

"In the neighborhood of fifteen million."

Ciara whistled. "Nice neighborhood."

Agent Smith shrugged, as if the fifteen mil were inconsequential. "The royal family of Monaco claim the real value cannot be expressed in financial terms. Sentimental currency only."

"It really belonged to Princess Grace?" Ciara shivered with delight. She'd worked cases with some pretty high-profile names attached. Considering the price tags on the items she found, low-profile names usually couldn't afford them in the first place, let alone swing government intervention when they were stolen. But she'd never done a trace for an item that belonged to royalty—Hollywood or genuine. Grace Kelly had been both.

"How did the thieves get a hold of it?" she asked.

"Is that any of your business?"

“Nope. Just curious. I’m amazed they got it past the Guard and out of Monaco. Isn’t royal security usually tight as a drum?”

“You know this from all your vast experience breaking into royal households?”

Ciara rolled her eyes. “I know this from all my vast experience watching heist movies. I’ve also learned not to try to rob casinos or museums, unless you have a team of extremely good-looking men, in which case you are sure to get away with it. And that all the best thieves are stealing from safe deposit boxes these days.”

“You have a serious fiction addiction.”

She shrugged. “It’s a hobby. Are you sure I can’t convince you to step outside? Just for a minute. You can search the room for hidden cell phones before you go.”

“Why don’t you just confess? Save us both the bullshit of playing psychic. We can go grab a nice lunch, my treat, and you can tell me all about your life of crime. I promise not to judge.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re the picture of forgiveness. If it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll stick with my psychic bullshit. Thanks.”

“Suit yourself.” His eyes raked down her and he smiled wolfishly. “Nice shirt.”

Ciara flushed and dropped down so the water covered her breasts, but that wasn’t much help in the modesty department. Her shirt was clinging to her like a second skin, outlining every curve in graphic detail—and rustling against her senses like crackling tissue paper.

Whenever she touched an object, any object, there was a static hum, like a radio just out of tune, but when she engaged her gift, surrounded in the water that acted as an amplifier, the volume on that radio would be cranked up to a shattering decibel. Tracing the necklace with her clothes pressing against her skin was going to be flat-out painful, but she was too stubborn, and Agent Smith made her too nervously *aware*, to consider taking it off.

She’d just push through the pain.

Ciara dropped back and drew up her legs to float in the water. She closed her eyes and tried to let the peace of the water wash away the rest of the world, but each rub of denim and cotton against her skin was a static explosion inside her mind. She forced herself to focus on the necklace as Agent Smith had described it.

A vision flashed behind her eyelids, but it was blurry and disjointed, like an old television set, improperly tuned. The more she tried to bring it into sharp focus, the worse the pictures got. Fuzzy and choppy, the images flashed in her mind: slot machines...a long, wide boardwalk beside a rough gray ocean...pedestrians in brightly colored shirts posing in front of a statue of an elephant.

The dissonance from the fabric against her skin turned into a burn. She knew it was just in her mind—*knew* it—but that didn’t make it seem any less real. She was being painted in acid and each brushstroke made her stomach churn. *I’m going to be sick.*

Ciara burst up out of the water, yanking the clinging shirt away from her skin and dragging in great gulps of oxygen. “Atlantic City,” she sputtered. “It’s in Atlantic City.”

Agent Smith started toward her, then seemed to stop himself. He leaned against the wall and arched a brow, looking utterly unimpressed. The bastard. She’d just painted her skin in acid for him and he looked like he was a breath away from yawning in her face.

“You got anything more specific than that? There are more than a couple places to hide a necklace in Atlantic City.”

“No, I don’t got anything more specific than that,” Ciara snapped at the ungrateful prick. “Because *someone* wouldn’t leave me the hell alone long enough to get a better reading. I *told* you I can’t work with things on my skin.”

“So strip.”

“Leave and I will.”

“Sorry, sweetheart. As soon as I leave, you’re gonna be on the phone to your jewelry-fence boyfriend, tipping him off that I’m on my way to Atlantic City.”

“I don’t have a jewelry-fence boyfriend, you paranoid prick.”

“No? How about a brother? Or some guy you went to school with? Or girl. I’m sure criminals are very into women’s lib.”

“I am helping you,” Ciara grumbled, climbing out of the pool, “and you’re accusing me of criminal activity. If you would just leave me alone for *five minutes*, I could give you the exact location of the necklace. *Exact.*”

He shook his head. “Not gonna happen, sweetheart. You’re stuck with me.”

“Only until Monday,” Ciara muttered.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What happens on Monday?”

Ciara smiled sweetly up at him as she grabbed a fresh towel off the rack on the wall. “My boss calls your boss and you go away. Poof.”

His face darkened. “Is that a threat? Are you threatening a federal agent?”

“I thought you’d be happy. You obviously don’t want to work with me either. I’ve already spoken with Karma. She’s going to get it all straightened out on Monday.” Ciara wrapped the towel around her shoulders. Her clothes had stopped feeling like acid, but she still wanted to get them off her skin as soon as possible. Agent Smith looming over her didn’t give her much hope that as soon as possible would be very soon.

“You honestly thought I would run off on some wild-goose chase to Atlantic City? How dumb do I look?”

"I'm not going on looks, Agent Smith, I'm going by your behavior, which, so far, has been pretty damn dumb." To be honest, she couldn't blame him for doubting her. She'd probably have doubted too, but she wasn't feeling terribly forgiving with the memory of her acid-wash jeans still fresh in her mind.

"You want me to believe the necklace is in Atlantic City, then you're coming to Atlantic City with me to find it."

Ciara laughed. "I can't."

"Yes, you can. And you will."

She started shaking her head and found she couldn't stop. It just kept swinging back and forth in a pendulum of denial. "No, I can't. You don't understand. I don't leave this house. Ever. I can't."

He frowned. "Are you phobic or something?"

"My skin," she reminded him. "I can't touch people without horrible psychic backlash and even just touching foreign objects, being surrounded by them, the static noise is unbearable. I just can't handle it."

"A Psychic Bubble Girl."

"Sort of. Yeah. Sure. Exactly."

His brows rose high above his deceptively warm chocolate-brown eyes. "Do you have a note from your doctor?"

"Of course not. It's not like I'm trying to get out of gym class."

"Then I guess you're coming with me."

Ciara's head started shaking again. *No, no, no.* "You can't make me. I'm an American citizen. I have rights."

"You certainly do. But you're also a person of interest in eighty-five different unsolved robberies."

"I solved them," she insisted. "I found the jewels."

"But not the jewel thieves. Very convenient, that."

"I can only locate the stolen items, not the people who took them."

"That's a real shame. If we'd caught a few more of the actual thieves in the recovery, I wouldn't have reason to be suspicious of you. You say you aren't a crook. You say you're psychic, but you can't prove it. That's a real shame. It kind of makes me wonder what else is going on at Karmic Consultants that might be of questionable legality. It's a very fishy company. So-called psychics and mediums. Who do you think would be most interested in investigating Karmic Consultants? The feds in charge of organized crime or the ones who investigate confidence schemes?"

Ciara's heart stopped. Karmic Consultants was the best thing that had ever happened to her. Karma was more than her boss. She was family. Ciara would be lost without them.

The threat against them was more potent than any he could have leveled against her personally. In her personal life, she had very little to lose, but Karmic was everything.

She stared across the pool at the adamant federal agent. "This is blackmail."

“Nonsense. It’s a choice. As I see it, you have three options.” He ticked them off on his fingers. “One, you confess. Two, you and your buddies at Karmic Consultants submit to a thorough up-the-ass investigation by the Bureau to ensure you’re operating one hundred percent on the right side of the law. Or three, you come to Atlantic City and show me where that necklace is. Your call.”

Ciara was trapped, pure and simple. She couldn’t confess, because there was nothing to confess to, and she couldn’t put Karmic Consultants through an up-the-ass federal investigation because she wasn’t entirely sure KC *was* one hundred percent on the right side of the law—she’d been asked to find some very odd items in the course of her career with them. She didn’t question Karma’s morality for a second, but the legality was a bit iffier.

Which left option number three. Atlantic City. Leaving her house, her comfort zone, and going to America’s Playground with a man who thought she was either a nutcase, a criminal or both. A spark of excitement kindled in her heart.

If the situation weren’t quite so ridiculous, it might actually be an adventure.

Chapter Four—Nudists & Man Love: America's Playground Under Siege

Ciara wandered with Nate down the Atlantic City Boardwalk, dodging tourists. Over the last few days as they searched for the necklace, an easy rapport had slowly built between them. She could almost think they were a normal couple on vacation—if not for the fact that she was more or less his hostage.

She hadn't been able to get in touch with Karma and her boss couldn't contact her since the only phone she had was the landline back at her house. If Nate had been replaced on her detail, he certainly wasn't letting on. She was stuck with him, at least until they found the necklace and he allowed her access to a phone again.

On the plus side, being in Atlantic City wasn't as torturous as she'd imagined it would be. The psychic noise wasn't nearly as deafening as she'd expected. She kept a light shawl wrapped around her arms and shoulders at all times to protect against casual contact, and so far she'd managed to avoid brushing up against any strangers, with only a couple acrobatic maneuvers required. As a first attempt at the real world, it was a remarkably successful one. She could handle the psychic dissonance so much better than she'd been able to when her abilities had first developed. It was almost fun, getting out of the house, seeing the sights.

Now if only she had the first clue where the damn necklace was.

Nate had secured them a crappy little motel room, miles off the Boardwalk, courtesy of the FBI, while they were searching AC for the necklace. Unfortunately, their luxurious accommodations didn't even have a bathtub for Ciara to float in. She'd tried a couple traces in the shower, but the tile burning through the soles of her feet had been too distracting and she hadn't been able to get a clear image. She kept getting useless, static-filled flashes of a casino floor—which didn't really narrow it down much in Atlantic City.

She was getting to the point where running naked into the Atlantic Ocean was starting to seem like a pretty good idea. At least then she would have something to tell Agent Control-Freak every time he asked her if she was ready to confess yet. The man redefined stubborn.

If he weren't also gorgeous, funny and considerate at the oddest moments, it would have been easy to hate him. Unfortunately, she kept forgetting she didn't like him.

Ciara looked up at the impressive façade of the Trump Taj Mahal, not watching where she was walking and automatically measuring her stride to match Nate's limp. "I think Donald Trump did it."

“Watch out for the Griswolds.” Nate caught her arm, careful as ever to touch her only through the fabric of her shawl, and steered her out of the way of a family of overenthusiastic tourists. “Donald Trump did what?”

“Stole the Heart of Monaco.”

Nate snorted. “I see. And what is this hypothesis based on?”

“Well, he’s loaded,” she said reasonably, “but who’s to say his gains aren’t ill-gotten? Maybe he started out life as a cat burglar but had to give it up because he was shedding all over the crime scenes and leaving bits of that manly Trump-fro behind to implicate him.”

“Not all rich people are thieves.”

Ciara shrugged. “I saw the elephant statue outside the Trump Taj Mahal in my vision. His elephant, ergo his shameful life of crime.”

“I’m supposed to get a subpoena with ‘it’s his elephant’?”

“Come on, it’ll be fun. Arrest the Donald.”

“I don’t arrest honest businessmen.”

“Isn’t *honest businessman* an oxymoron?”

“Drop it, Ciara.”

Ciara glanced at him, surprised by the sharpness of his voice. “Are you offended by my impugning the Donald’s sterling character? Oh my God, you totally have a man crush on him, don’t you?”

“Of course not. I just respect his accomplishments.”

“Total man love. Wow. The Donald. What is it about him that turns you on, Nate? Is it the billions or the Trump-fro?” Ciara giggled to herself, disproportionately amused. “The Donald. That is so kinky.”

“Do you have any *real* recommendations on how to find the damn necklace?”

“Other than getting a hotel room with a bathtub in it?”

“Despite what the movies might show you, federal agents do not have unlimited budgets.”

“The fancy hotels are cheaper during the week,” Ciara wheedled. “It’s Wednesday.”

“Confess and I’ll get you a suite with a private hot tub.”

Ciara sighed. If she’d had anything to confess, he would have worn her down days ago. She’d actually started wishing she were really a criminal. It would have made him so happy. If his persistence hadn’t been so annoying, it might have been comic.

Nate slowed, absently rubbing at his thigh.

“Does it hurt?”

“No.”

Ciara stopped walking. Nate hobbled forward a few more steps, then turned to glare over his shoulder.

“Sometimes,” he admitted grudgingly. “It’s fine. I’m supposed to use it as much as I’m able. Physical therapy.”

A young family veered around them, their small children staring at Nate's cane. Thanks to his all-too-visible disability, the other pedestrians gave them a wide berth. Ciara wondered how many times she would have been bumped into if she hadn't been with Nate. Funny that the people around them veered away from him, when she was the real freak.

Ciara started walking again, easily making up the distance between them. "Does physical therapy mean it's getting better?"

Nate grimaced, bitterness raw on his face. "It isn't going to get better. The damage is permanent."

She'd been dying to know for days, but he didn't seem to want to talk. This was the most relaxed he'd been, so Ciara groped for the right words. "When...? How did it...?"

"Gunshot. Four weeks ago. I was working a job. The snitch we'd flipped to get me in flipped back and blew my cover. I went to the meet—public place, seemed safe enough. Bastard shot me under the table. Three in the leg. Nicked my femoral artery and completely pulped the muscles. They repaired the tendons where they could, but the muscle is still fucked. With all the blood I lost, the doctors were amazed I even lived. Kept feeding me this bullshit line about how I should be grateful for my life. Walking with a cane for the rest of my life isn't such a big deal when I should be dead, right?"

Ciara heard the anger in his voice like an echo from her past. She remembered how hard it had been when her gift first developed. How the pain at human contact hadn't been nearly as horrifying as the idea of living her *entire life* crippled by her own senses. She'd gotten through it. She'd bounced back and found her optimism again, but those first few months had been hell and she'd ruined more relationships than she cared to think about during that time—her foster parents, childhood friends, there weren't many people she hadn't alienated.

Ciara didn't insult Nate's intelligence by telling him he was lucky. "That sucks. What happened to the guy who shot you?"

"I shot his ass right back." He tapped his shoulder just above his heart. "You can bet your sweet ass I was carrying. Of course, my aim sucked with three in my leg. He'll live to see his trial and I get stuck behind a desk for the rest of my life. How's that for justice?"

"You really loved your job, didn't you?"

"Sure beat sitting on my ass all day." He bared his teeth in the feral grin of a hardcore adrenaline junkie.

Since sitting on her ass—or rather floating around her pool—was exactly what Ciara did all day, she let the conversation drop. Thrill seeking and running into danger to get the bad guys wasn't exactly an option with her skill set.

Lapsing into silence, she studied Nate out of the corner of her eye.

In the last four days, he hadn't let her out of his sight for more than a few seconds (even the FBI made allowances for bodily functions, thank goodness). He would grill her about her supposed crimes, then they

would both stew in silence, but it hadn't taken her long to figure out that neither of them were very good at holding grudges. All too often, when they weren't focusing on hating one another, they found themselves chatting comfortably.

Surprising as it was, Nate Smith was actually a pretty likable guy, when he wasn't accusing her of a felony.

They approached the steel pier, with the garish Ferris wheel and carnival atmosphere. Nate steered them toward the arcade—it was one of the few places along the Boardwalk they hadn't already looked for the necklace, though neither of them held out any hope of finding it just wandering around town. Nate was trying to wait her out, get her to admit she'd lied. Under other circumstances, his persistence might even be attractive. As it was, it was a major pain in the ass.

Ciara'd been trying to find a chance to use her gift all week. If she could just prove she really was a psychic finder, they could grab the necklace and return home. Maybe she wouldn't have Nate reassigned. He was pretty to look at, if nothing else.

"Why do you find it so hard to believe I might be telling the truth?" Ciara asked. "That I might actually be able to find things with my mind? Do you think everyone who claims to be psychic is full of shit?"

He shrugged. "There's a lot of crap in this world I don't understand. You say there are ghosts and demons? It kinda makes sense. So, no, I don't have a personal grudge against psychics."

"Then what is your problem?"

"It's too easy."

"Too easy?" Irritation lanced through Ciara. She was a housebound freak of nature who couldn't touch another human being and her ability was too *easy*?

"Don't get all pissy," he grumbled. "It isn't you. It's the whole idea. Magical solutions to tough problems. It's a fucking copout." Nate leaned against the fence surrounding the carousel. He was too stubborn to admit he needed to rest, but after the long walk up the boardwalk, his leg must be killing him. "I busted my ass for years, scrounging for evidence, building cases, bringing down the bad guys. I lost my fucking leg for the job. And now you want me to believe all I had to do this whole time was jump naked into a hot tub and make a wish? Sorry, sweetheart, the world doesn't work like that. If it sounds too good to be true, it is. You tell me you're psychic? Fine. Whatever. But don't ask me to believe in the easy way out. There isn't one."

Ciara folded her arms across her chest and fixed her gaze on the horizon. The sun had come out today, blazing hot and making the grayish expanse of the Atlantic Ocean look almost blue. The bright light made the beaches seem more appealing and the casinos more tawdry. Atlantic City was an odd mix of wholesomeness and cheap thrills, and beneath it all ran a thrumming undercurrent of vice and addiction. Ciara felt it all, a constant vibration in the back of her mind.

“It isn’t easy,” she said quietly. “I’m alone. I can’t have real relationships. And whenever I’m not floating in water, the psychic dissonance bouncing off objects and people around me is a constant static in the back of my mind. It’s like an alarm you can’t turn off. Even if I’ve learned to tune it out, it’s always there, buzzing in my mind. Finding lost and stolen things is the *one thing* about my life that isn’t noisy or painful, but don’t think for a second that it’s *easy*.”

Nate shook his head, watching the screaming children running through the arcade, competing for stuffed animals not worth the price of playing the games. “I can’t figure you out. What’s the angle? Is it just the reward money? It’s so much less than you would get by fencing the jewels. Why would a thief tell you where he stashed his take if he knew you were just going to turn around and give it over to the FBI? We’ve thoroughly checked all the recovered items and none of them are fakes. I can’t figure out what scheme you’re running.”

“Eventually, you’re going to realize it isn’t a scheme. I’m not in cahoots. I’m just a girl with weird abilities. No Machiavellian plans. No dramatic underworld connections. Just a somewhat pathetic, isolated weirdo whose brain is tuned to an unusual psychic frequency.”

Nate met her eyes. He seemed to be searching for clues there, answers. Ciara kept her gaze steady, striving for an appearance of innocence and honesty, hoping he would see the truth.

But then he shook his head, that irritating stubbornness suffusing his face. “No. You’ll tell me what you’re up to. Come on.” He shoved away from the fence and headed back toward the boardwalk.

Ciara felt a weight drop on her chest. He was never going to believe her. She’d tried logic, persistence and calm. She’d tried screaming and begging, laughter and charm. He wouldn’t change his mind.

She was going to have to show him.

She could strip and jump into the ocean, but she’d need a head start on him. She’d never tried her powers in salt water, but they should work, shouldn’t they? If chlorine didn’t impact her abilities, salt wouldn’t. Probably.

Then, like a mirage, she saw the answer to her prayers. Just beyond the ring-toss game was a dunk tank, full of water, with a semipermanent *Back in Thirty Minutes* sign hanging crookedly on the front.

Ciara glanced toward Nate. He was walking away, making his usual slow progress. If she ran, there was no way he’d be able to get to her before she was in the dunk tank. She didn’t see any security guards either. By the time they were called over to fish her out, or by the time Nate reached her, she would know where the necklace was. She could show him. He would have to believe her then.

She didn’t have time to think about her decision. Any second now Nate would realize she wasn’t following him. He moved slowly, but not *that* slowly. He was learning how to maneuver more quickly with the cane every day. She’d already seen his balance improving as he adjusted to his new situation. He wasn’t quite up to running with the cane, but she didn’t doubt he could work up a shuffling trot when called upon.

If she was going to do this, she had to do it *now*.

She'd played it safe too long. For a decade she'd hidden in her house, convincing herself she was happy and didn't regret the chances she was afraid to take. She was in Atlantic City with a man who thought she was a jewel thief. Now was not the time to play it safe.

Ciara released her grip on her shawl, sprinting toward the tank as the fabric fluttered to the ground.

Chapter Five—Suicidal Psychics & Mouth to Mouth

Nate realized Ciara wasn't following him a fraction of a second before the first startled shout. He pivoted, nearly losing his balance and bracing himself with the damned cane. Had she run off to meet her fence? He'd actually started to wonder if she was telling the truth. She'd almost had him convinced a time or two. Was it all just an attempt to sucker him in so she could sneak off?

At first he didn't see her.

Then everyone saw her.

Nate's mouth went dry. She perched on the platform above the murky dunk tank, bare-ass naked. The smooth black length of her hair slid over her shoulders, but instead of concealing her nakedness, it just seemed to accent it. Her arms crossed over her breasts, and the way she drew up one knee and bent at the waist maintained the impression of decency.

Nate began shouldering his way toward her. A crowd gathered around the foot of the tank—the spectators evenly divided between the amused and the enraged.

"Ciara," he shouted, hoping she could hear him over the rising chatter of the crowd. "Don't you dare."

Before he finished speaking, she plunged into the tank.

"Dammit."

The crowd oohed, and a murmur rippled through, as if they were watching a floorshow at the Flamingo. Nate fought his way through the mass of people who pressed closer to the tank. As he shoved past, he heard snatches of speculation.

"Is she an escape artist?"

"No, she isn't tied up. She must be a showgirl from the Trump."

"Nah, she's just nuts. Another crazy who lost her shirt." The speaker snickered, pleased with the joke.

"Is that Lucy Liu? Oh my God, it's a movie. They're totally filming us right now! How's my hair?"

They would never believe the truth. *He* hadn't believed the truth. She'd told him over and over again, but it took her jumping naked into a vat of water on the Atlantic City pier before the reality that she really was a psychic finder of lost things crashed into his brain.

She was actually, honestly a psychic. Dammit.

Nate rammed through the crowd, finally breaking free next to the tank. She hadn't come up for air or even twitched a muscle. She floated, gracefully suspended in the water, looking utterly at peace, but for all

the crowd knew she was drowning. And not one of them had moved to get her out. They just oohed and aahed and stared.

At the back of the crowd, a pair of uniformed security guards began plowing through the spectators.

Nate winced. Technically, they weren't supposed to be here. He'd been given a desk. He was supposed to be sitting at it. Ciara was supposed to be at home, floating in her own pool. He had some leeway since he'd just come off medical leave. His bosses probably thought he'd taken a few extra days to recover. They wouldn't start questioning his absence at his assigned desk for another week, if he was lucky.

Unless he and his valuable contact got arrested for public indecency in Atlantic City. That was the kind of mishap they paid attention to.

He needed to get Ciara and get the hell out of there. The last thing he wanted was to get stuck answering questions about why, exactly, paid federal informant Ciara Liung was naked in public.

Behind the tank, a ladder led up to the platform above the water. Nate dropped his cane on top of the pile of Ciara's clothing and grabbed the sides of the ladder. Using his arms as much as his legs, he hopped and pulled himself up rung by rung.

Ciara still hadn't moved. Her hair swirled around her in the water, brushing against the sides of the tank in artistic sweeps.

Nate hauled himself up another three rungs until his shoulders rose above the edge of the tank. If she'd been telling the truth about everything, this was going to hurt her, but he didn't see an alternative. They didn't have time to waste.

He sank a hand into the water to fish her out. His fingers closed around her upper arm.

Ciara's body jerked, contorting and thrashing in the water, but she didn't rise toward the surface. If anything, she sank deeper, as if to escape his touch. Nate kept his hand tight on her arm. If he let her go now, he'd never get a grip on her again with the way she was writhing around. He yanked hard, trying to pull her out, but something jerked back and kept her down.

Her hair had caught on the metal fittings inside the tank. Her mouth worked as if she were screaming and bubbles burst to the surface.

Shit. She was drowning. Unacceptable. He had to get her out of there and he had to do it now.

Nate yanked again, pulling as hard as he could, but wavering with one leg on the ladder, he didn't have the leverage to apply enough force. "*Dammit.*" He clambered up another rung, forcing the weight through his damaged leg, hoping it would hold and give him the leverage needed to get her out. Tightening his fingers, he jerked again on her arm. She came loose suddenly, surging upward, her body still seizing uncontrollably.

Her face broke the surface and she gagged, sputtering and coughing out a stream of water. His muscles strained as he continued to pull her out, dragging her upward until she sat on the narrow platform

atop the tank. She drew her legs up out of the water without his urging, curling into a ball on the platform as she continued to cough and retch.

Nate became aware of a roaring cheer. He looked up to see the crowd around them applauding like they'd just seen a fabulous show. The security guards were closer now, but hesitating, as if they weren't sure whether the show was staged or illegal.

Nate slipped off his linen suit jacket, wrapping it around Ciara's shoulders. He tugged her close against his chest. Only when she stopped heaving and rested her cheek against his soaked shirt did his heart start beating again.

He needed to get her out of here before security decided they didn't like the show, but he couldn't make his hands stop shaking. "What the hell were you thinking?" he asked against her hair, pressing her tight against him.

"The Borgata. The necklace is at the Borgata."

"Who the fuck cares?" he snarled. He cradled her tight against his chest, lifting her weight off the platform and into his arms.

It was an idiotic move. For a second, in his relief that she was all right, he forgot he didn't have two good legs underneath him anymore. His bad leg buckled on the rung. He nearly pitched them both off the ladder for an eight-foot fall to the asphalt below. He grabbed the side of the ladder, hauling himself forward with his other arm wrapped protectively around Ciara.

Her arms clenched convulsively, one clinging to his shoulder as the other wound tight around his neck, the bare skin of her arm pressed warm and wet against the back of his neck.

He froze as he remembered her words about not being able to be touched. Had he caused her seizure? Was she in pain even now as her skin pressed against his?

Nate raised his head to peer down at her. "Ciara? Are you all right?"

She lifted her face to him. An awestruck expression softened her features with wonder. "Holy crap."

Chapter Six—Epiphanies and Backseat Hookups

She could touch him.

Ciara felt the foundations of her entire world shatter and reform beneath her. A thousand questions poured through her mind, so quickly she could barely register them all. Was it him? Was there something different, something special about him? Or had she changed on some fundamental level? How long had she been able to do this? Had she been hiding out all this time for nothing?

When he'd touched her skin in the tank, it was like a bomb had gone off in her brain. She hadn't been able to think. Even her survival instincts had self-combusted. After he fished her out, without the amplification of the water, the sting of his touch was bearable, but by no means pleasant. Then they'd nearly fallen. Acting on instinct, she'd clung to him, *reached* for him. For that fraction of a second it hadn't been about defending herself, and everything changed.

It was like the world suddenly came into tune. The dissonant cacophony of his touch resolved into a poetry of sound. If not a symphony, at least a pure bell-like note with a simple beauty.

She'd been fighting this part of her psychic nature for so long, trying to smother the noise, but she'd never really *listened*. Had she handicapped herself?

"Ciara." Nate said her name again with more urgency. "Are you okay?"

Okay? The tidal wave of emotion crashing down on her was a lot of things—hope, euphoria, fear that it would go away, regret that it had taken her so long to hear—but *okay* wasn't one of them.

"Ciara!" A hint of panic tinged his voice.

"I'm fine. I'm—" So much better than fine. She didn't have words in her vocabulary for how she felt. She was singing on the parade float in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, kissing Conrad Birdie on the Ed Sullivan Show in *Bye Bye, Birdie*, and coming out of the corner in *Dirty Dancing* all rolled into one.

Nate nodded curtly. "Good. Let's get the hell out of here before you get arrested." He moved down the ladder with surprising grace, landing awkwardly but recovering quickly. He reached up for her and Ciara scrambled down, one hand pinching the lapels of his jacket closed over her breasts.

"Can't you wave your magic FBI wand and make the police go away?"

"Public nudity is frowned on, even for federal agents." He grabbed the pile of her clothes and tossed them at her. Ciara caught them reflexively.

Before she could pull them on, he took her hand, snatched up his cane and rushed away from the scene of the crime. The feel of his fingers wrapped around hers sang through her blood, a sweet, unfamiliar thrill.

Together, they ducked behind a game booth, out of sight of the security guards she saw plowing through the crowd toward them. Nate pulled her behind him along the back of the booths, winding back toward the boardwalk.

“What the hell was that?” he snapped, without pausing.

“I was finding—”

“I know what you were doing. Could you have found a more public place to play naked psychic?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, where would you have preferred I *play psychic*? In the luxurious bath in that plush suite the FBI sprang for? You took me away from my *private* pool and dragged me here, accusing me of every felony you could think of. What was I supposed to do?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize doubting you was going to make you want to drown yourself in front of a cheering audience.”

“That apology would mean so much more if you weren’t yelling at me for doing exactly what you’ve been badgering me to do all week. I found the Heart of Monaco. *Found. It.*”

“And how was that going to help me if you were dead?”

They darted across the Boardwalk, ignoring the stares directed toward her bare legs, and through the doors into the casino at the Trump Taj Mahal. Nate stormed through the maze-like rows of slot machines and blackjack tables.

She hurried in his wake. “I’m not dead, thank you very much, and I wouldn’t have been in any danger at all if you hadn’t grabbed me.”

His hand dropped hers so quickly she lost a step, stumbling.

“Damn,” he swore, rubbing his palm on his pants as if she had cooties. “I keep forgetting not to touch you.”

Ciara grabbed his hand again, just because she could, seizing the chance to touch. “No. It’s okay now. Don’t ask me why, but it’s okay.”

He frowned, as if uncertain whether she was lying to him now or had been lying to him before. He nodded toward a door behind her. “Go put your clothes back on.”

“Then we’ll go to the Borgata, right? Get the necklace?”

Nate shook his head, bemused. “You really found it? You know...” He trailed off, shooting an icy glare over her shoulder.

Ciara turned and saw a man old enough to be her father, who looked like he hadn’t showered or stepped out of the casino in days, leering at her legs. Nate snarled at him until he ducked his head and returned to his addiction of choice, yanking down the lever on a slot machine.

Nate gave her a gentle shove toward the ladies' room behind her. "Get dressed. Then we'll talk."

Ciara was standing in the stall, pulling her dress over her head, when she realized Nate had actually let her out of his sight. He hadn't swept the bathroom to make sure there weren't other exits or frisked her for a hidden cell phone. He'd just let her walk in here without so much as a second glance.

In the four days she'd known him, that was unprecedented.

Could Nate Smith actually believe her?

Ciara came out of the bathroom to find Nate leaning against a slot machine as he waited. He looked utterly relaxed, as if there hadn't been even a flicker of doubt in his mind that she would return to him. Trust. It seemed to have burst open between them impossibly fast.

She didn't know when she had started trusting him, a moment ago, a day ago, maybe a part of her had started trusting him the moment he rang her doorbell. But his trust of her seemed to hinge on that moment in the tank. Sure, she'd done it so he would believe her, but now she was suspicious of that instant faith.

Nate levered himself away from the slots. "Come on. Let's get you out of here." He started to reach for her hand again, then snatched his hand back. His eyes scanned her from her flip-flop bedecked toes all the way up to her still-damp hair, as if checking for war wounds.

Ciara rolled her eyes. "I'm *fine*. Better than fine. I'm—" Again words failed. This feeling, it was too much. "Come on. We've got a necklace to find."

She grabbed his hand and dragged him behind her toward the street exit. Ciara felt like laughing, though she didn't know why.

She wore his jacket over her dress—the shawl a casualty of her dunking—but as soon as they stepped out of the air-conditioning of the casino, she shrugged it off. The sun hit the skin of her arms and felt delicious. For once she was outside, surrounded by people and not worried about being brushed against.

Though maybe she should be worried. What if it was only Nate she could touch?

He hailed a taxi and ushered her into the backseat, careful as he had been all week not to touch her skin.

"The Borgata, please," she told the driver.

Nate climbed in after her. "No," he said, "let's go back to the hotel. You can rest—"

"The Borgata," she repeated, more firmly. No more invalid treatment. No more hiding.

There were a million things she'd never done. Too many things. A wild excitement pulsed through her veins. A thousand possibilities.

She could eat in a restaurant, dance in a club, go to a movie in a crowded theater where the schmuck next to her would steal her armrest. She could fly on a plane. Go to Egypt or Bermuda or Taiwan. She didn't know why she should want to go to Taiwan unless she was picking up a few sweatshop workers, but the fact that she *could* changed everything. It changed *her*.

Nate wedged himself against the car door, as far away from her as he could get without leaping into oncoming traffic.

“What are you doing way over there?”

“Recovering from the heart attack you gave me on the pier,” he snapped. “And trying to figure out how to talk you into going back to the hotel and leaving the jewel thieves to the professionals.”

“I thought I was a suspect,” she purred, scooting across the bench seat toward him. “Don’t you want my confession?”

He leaned away, pressing into the door. “You aren’t a crook. I believe you. Now back off, before you give yourself another seizure.”

Ciara kept her eyes locked on his, slowly shaking her head. “Nate, for the first time in the last decade, I can touch someone without feeling like someone dropped a cherry bomb into my brain. Do you honestly think I’m not going to take advantage of this for every second it lasts?” She reached out and laid her fingers along his jaw. She *listened* and the touch sang through her, a perfect pitch ringing sweetly, deep inside her rib cage.

She slid her fingers down, drawing them along the column of his throat, listening as the note shifted with his every breath. Her eyes fixed on his mouth, the delicious masculine curve of it.

Ten years. She hadn’t been kissed in ten years.

“Nate,” she whispered. Her upper body leaned forward of its own volition, closing the distance between them. She wet her lips.

“This is a bad idea. I don’t think—”

“Don’t think. It’s overrated.” Ciara’s eyelids lowered, but she watched him through her lashes, not wanting to miss a single detail of the kiss. She brushed her lips ever so softly over his, a fleeting whisper of a touch. His breath was warm on her lips. His stubble grazed her fingertips, the tantalizing spice of his aftershave teasing her nose. Ciara pressed a closed-mouth kiss full on his mouth and a chord struck in her soul. She placed one hand over his heart, feeling his strength through the thin cloth of his shirt. She wanted bare flesh under her fingers. She wanted to bathe in touch, skin to skin.

Nate kept his mouth closed, his head back. He was frozen against the door, as if afraid to touch her.

Or as if he didn’t want her touch.

Ciara drew back. Her eyes flew wide to find him watching her, his gaze steady and concerned.

“You don’t—” She hesitated. Crap. With her luck, he was probably gay. Just because he seemed like a big strong macho man and gaped at her naked girly bits whenever the opportunity presented itself didn’t mean he wasn’t batting for the other team. “You aren’t—” She couldn’t very well ask him what his sexual orientation was five seconds after she planted one on him.

God, her people skills sucked. That’s what happened when you lived in a freaking bubble for a decade and learned all of your social skills from the television and internet. Had she missed some signal?

He watched her. God, the way he watched her. It made her feel like she was edible, sweet and sinful, and he was hungry for some decadent indulgence. Would a gay man look at her like that?

But if he wasn't gay, what the hell was he doing cowering beside the door like she was molesting him against his will. His body was eerily still, but his eyes raced over her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, an odd urgency running under the words.

Was she *okay*? She kissed him. He didn't kiss her back. And now he was concerned that...what?

"That didn't hurt you?" His voice was rough.

Ciara blinked, the pieces suddenly jolting into place. Of course. Mr. All-American was concerned for her well-being. His moral fortitude prevented him from enjoying a kiss if it might be hurting her. Damn moral fortitude. Why couldn't he just take advantage of her like a normal man?

"I'm fine," she assured him in a rush. "Great, actually. It feels amazing."

"Good."

Before she had time to react to that guttural growl, his hands were on her arms. He hauled her forward across his lap. His mouth crashed down on hers, urging her to open for him, and a symphony exploded inside her. Ciara threw her arms around his neck and held on tight. She parted her lips and his tongue slipped between them, a whip of heat unfurling in her stomach with each flick.

She didn't remember kisses like this. She remembered the fumbling, groping, wide-open-mouthed attempts of her adolescence, before her curse hit. This was unlike any of those. This was skill and persuasion, seduction and heat. As a fiery concerto radiated out from her soul, a clenching warmth rose up from her toes, tingling along every nerve. Nate's hands chased those tingles and multiplied them, tracing her curves through the thin barrier of her clothes.

He raised his head. His eyes searched hers as they clung together, both breathing rapidly. "Ciara?"

"More, Nate," she whispered. "Please, touch me more."

He groaned and crushed her to him, instantly obeying. His mouth slanted down on hers and she fell into sensation. She wanted to explore this, to venture into every corner of her capabilities. The Magellan of desire. The Ponce de León of irrepressible need.

"Ahem. The Borgata."

Ciara broke away from Nate at the cabbie's dry cough, her face flaming. From shut-in to exhibitionist nympho in four days flat. That had to be some kind of record.

Nate caught the cabbie's eye and shared a smug grin. Just like a man. "How much do we owe you?" Even his voice was smug. So damned pleased with himself.

Though she supposed she couldn't blame him. She was feeling pretty cat-who-caught-the-canary herself.

Chapter Seven—Get a Room

The Borgata Hotel and Casino towered above the Atlantic City marina, a glistening glass masterpiece. When the taxi pulled in front of the main entrance, a doorman rushed to open the door. Nate paid the cabbie and stepped out of the cab after Ciara, pressing a bill into the doorman's hand.

Another casual touch. Doormen, taxi drivers, careless pedestrians bumping into one another. He'd never really given much thought to how many times a day he touched people, until Ciara. Now he couldn't seem to think of anything else. All week he'd been haunted by the urge to touch her. Her smooth, pale skin had lured him in, but he'd kept his distance.

Then all of a sudden she'd done a one-eighty. Touch was not only allowed, she couldn't seem to stop touching him. She made it impossible for him to keep his hands to himself.

Ciara twined their fingers together and bent her arm behind her back so she was cradled in the crook of his arm. "Let's get a room."

Nate laughed and guided her toward the opulent entrance. "We're here on business, remember? A certain necklace?"

She smiled brightly at the doorman who swept aside the door to the lobby, but pitched her voice low, just for his ears. "How about a quickie? Just to take the edge off."

Her throaty suggestion had him half hard at the prospect. She meant it too. He could see her sincerity in the wicked gleam in her eyes. Saying no just about killed him.

He groaned. "I'd like to keep my edge, thank you. While we're grabbing a quickie, the thieves could be fencing the necklace."

He paused at the border of the lobby, staring out over the sensory blitz of the casino. Up-lit columns and marble floors wound between rows of hundreds of slot machines and a line of empty blackjack tables. The necklace could be anywhere. Luckily he had a secret weapon. "So where is it?"

"A hotel safe."

Shit. Nate swore. "If it's in the hotel's safe, we'll need a warrant. Which means we need probable cause."

Ciara shook her head, leaning her body against his from shoulders to knees. "Not *the* hotel safe. A hotel safe. One of the ones in a room. A pretty plush room, by the look of it. White living room furniture and a killer view over the marina."

"What's the room number?"

Ciara winced. “Yeah, sometimes the trace isn’t quite as precise as I might wish. I don’t know the room number. But I’m pretty sure it was the woman in pink’s room.”

Nate couldn’t help the skepticism that declaration induced. “The woman in pink,” he repeated.

“You can’t miss her,” Ciara assured him. “She’s probably a showgirl or something. Pink bustier and hot pants. Blonde with silver eyelashes. Pretty tall, I think, though I can’t really be sure. She’s distinctive.”

“So we’re supposed to wander around looking for a showgirl?”

“She’s definitely here,” Ciara insisted. “I saw the Borgata clear as day.”

Nate grimaced. A woman in a pink bustier was his best lead. And even if they found her, he didn’t have a warrant, or even the means of producing a warrant. He couldn’t just go in, guns a’blazing, and steal back the necklace. That wasn’t how things worked in the real world.

He’d come to Atlantic City more to get Ciara to confess than to actually find the necklace. If the Heart of Monaco really was here, and she wasn’t a criminal, then he needed to call it in. He needed to find out from his boss what the procedure was regarding Ciara’s tips. How did they usually get warrants for her finds?

And he should probably let her get in touch with her boss to prove she wasn’t dead.

“If I get you to a bathtub, do you think you could get a better read? Maybe find the room number?”

“Maybe,” Ciara said, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “I can definitely try.”

Nate nodded, once, decisively. “Done.”

Twenty minutes later Nate unlocked the door to a Fiore suite with amenities described as a deep-soaking tub and shower for two. His credit card had taken a beating, but there was always the slim chance the FBI might reimburse him. Provided he didn’t get fired for running off to Atlantic City with an informant.

Ciara made a beeline for the bathroom and cooed in delight. “It’s *amazing*,” she called out to him as he dropped onto the king-sized bed.

Their things were still back at the other hotel, so his possessions were currently limited to the severely wrinkled suit he had on, a few credit cards, his cell phone and the small piece in his ankle holster. He hadn’t even worn his shoulder holster today, figuring he wouldn’t need it and it would be too damn hot. Now he missed its weight.

“Why don’t you see if you can find the necklace?” he called back to Ciara, digging into his pocket for his cell phone.

Ciara shouted something back to him, but he couldn’t make out the words over the sound of water rushing into the tub. When the door to the bathroom clicked shut, he figured whatever she said must have been in the affirmative.

Nate turned the cell phone over in his hands. He needed to call his superiors. Now that he knew Ciara wasn't a crook. Or at least he *thought* he knew.

Images of her flashed in his mind. Ciara smiling up at him, her black eyes twinkling. Ciara naked and writhing in the dunk tank. Ciara pressed against him, begging for more as his mouth explored hers.

Was he getting too emotionally involved? Nate winced and pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd made out with her in a taxi, for fuck's sake. That was a textbook mistake. Would he even know if she were crooked?

What had been proved really? She'd jumped naked into a dunk tank. She'd told him the necklace was here. But he didn't have any confirmation of that fact. So why did he believe her now? Why did she suddenly feel so much more trustworthy?

He needed to stop thinking with his dick and get his head back into the game. To think about the case, not how quickly he could get out the condom stashed in his wallet.

Nate dialed the office, hoping for a bracing dose of perspective.

A fellow agent picked up his boss's phone on the third ring. "Cutter," he barked.

"Sam. It's Nate Smith. Is Roberts there?"

"Nate. How's the leg, man? We were hoping to see you in the office this week."

"The leg's fine, but I don't think I'm going to make it into the office. I'm in Atlantic City with Ciara Liung."

"The psychic? No shit? A psychic in Atlantic City. Why didn't I ever think of that? You playing roulette? Letting her pick the numbers and shit?"

"Sam, I'd really like to talk to Roberts."

"The bossman, eh? You can try the cell, but I wouldn't expect him to answer it. He's out chasing leads on the Monaco crisis."

"It's about the Monaco thing, actually."

"Yeah? Did you know some chick named Karma's called the office fifteen times about you and that Liung chick? She sounds pissed as all hell."

"Yeah, I'll deal with her later. About the necklace..."

"Your psychic chick find it already? That's great, but I wouldn't expect a lot of backup anytime soon. Unless you've got something hard. Everyone's out rattling cages trying to shake something loose so we don't end up with a fucking international incident. I pulled the short straw to stick around here and sort through the crazies on the tip line. You would not believe some of the messed-up shit people call in."

"Cutter," Nate began irritably.

"You want me to add your psychic chick's tip to the pile? Where'd she say it was?"

"A hotel safe in the Borgata. Atlantic City."

Cutter snorted into the phone. “Sure it is. Wanna trade caseloads? I’ll take all the ones involving casinos and strippers, and you can have my slimy assholes in back alleys. Seem fair?”

“Just tell Roberts to call me,” Nate said.

“Y’okay, Smith. You got it.”

Nate cut the connection and dialed his boss’s cell. It went straight through to voice mail. He left a message, and then tossed the cell phone onto the mattress behind him. “Dammit.”

Cutter was a likeable guy—even criminals seemed to get along well with him—but if Nate could have picked someone to take his call, Sam Cutter would have been pretty far down the list.

Cutter hadn’t taken him or Ciara’s lead seriously. Nate couldn’t even be sure his message would get passed along. The odds of more resources being allocated to Atlantic City were crappy at best.

He’d certainly come down in the world. Special Agent Nate Smith used to be a name that was whispered with awe around the Bureau. He was a badass undercover agent with an unprecedented arrest record. He had a reputation for being a hardass. A little edgy. Certainly someone no one ever mocked.

Now he was like a toothless shark. He still had the killer instinct, but he couldn’t act on it anymore.

The water had stopped running in the bathroom and he could hear Ciara humming tunelessly. He crossed to the door and knocked on it softly. “Ciara? You getting anything more?”

The sound of water splashing helped him conjure up a vivid image of her bathing nude on the other side of the door.

“Just more of the same,” she called. “No luck with the room number yet.”

Nate dropped his forehead against the door. He couldn’t catch a break. “Keep trying,” he requested. “I’m going to go see if I can find anything out from the hotel staff.”

Technically he was on medical leave and shouldn’t even be here, but he couldn’t wait around here and do nothing. He was not a useless cripple behind a desk. He was a trained field agent. He didn’t need a woman in a pink bustier to find the necklace. He’d solved dozens of cases without psychic intervention.

Maybe someone in hotel security had seen something. Casinos could be real bitches about the privacy of their clientele. Without a warrant, he couldn’t demand to see a guest list or access their security tapes, but often if the guys manning the security monitors felt like running their mouths, he could get all he needed without bothering with the slower-than-hell proper legal channels. He wasn’t without resources.

He would prove this shark still had a tooth or two.

Chapter Eight—Finders Gone Wild!

Ciara tried to wait patiently in the room for Nate to return. Really she did.

She tried finding the necklace a dozen different times, but she just got the same flashes over and over again. Usually she could pick up on some new clue, a visual hint she'd missed the first time, but this time she kept seeing the same woman, the same safe.

Ciara gave up and climbed out of the tub. She dried off and pulled on her dress, which was slightly the worse for wear.

Standing in the luxurious bathroom, Ciara studied herself in the enormous mirror. She looked...frumpy. Her dress had been chosen for comfort rather than style. It hung loosely from her shoulders with about as much shape as the average potato sack. Her hair hung straight and boring to the middle of her back. She'd never bothered with elaborate hairstyles, since fancy salons were out of the question, with the fancy stylists putting their fingers all over her head.

She didn't have makeup. She didn't have accessories. Even the little things added to the static—which she still heard. She'd tried *listening* to objects the same way she did to Nate, but she just got the same static feedback. No tuning-fork hum of perfection reverberating through her. But she wasn't giving up. Ciara had every intention of trying until she figured out the right frequency for the objects. She wasn't going to give up so easily ever again. She'd wasted too many years believing she couldn't touch people because she'd stopped trying.

She was a new Ciara now.

She studied her reflection. She needed to look new.

She'd seen a shopping mall off the casino downstairs while she and Nate were trying to find the right bank of elevators to take them up to their room. In the window of one boutique, a mannequin in a sexy red sheath dress had caught her eye.

She would look like eleven kinds of sin in that dress. Nate would never turn down a quickie if she were wearing that.

Two hours later Ciara had discovered there were very few things at the Borgata which could not be charged to your room—designer dresses, cosmetics, a haircut at the spa salon, even poker chips were just a signature away. Charge it to the FBI, darling. They could take it out of her fee.

Strutting from a blackjack table over to the noisy excitement of the roulette wheel, Ciara heard people whispering and pointing, mistaking her for a celebrity. She added a little extra swivel to her hips, managing

not to trip over her new three-and-half-inch heels. She felt like Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*, living out every fantasy as fast as she could before reality came crashing down.

The men at the roulette table sidled aside to make a space for her, leering appreciatively, and Ciara smiled to herself.

She felt powerful. She was a goddess tonight. A vampy starlet who took whatever she wanted.

Ciara leaned against the rail and casually flipped a chip onto the table, smiling at the man next to her. He was Jersey from head to toe. Italian, a little heavyset, wearing a dark suit over a brightly colored, partially unbuttoned shirt of some slippery material.

He wasn't appealing in the visceral way Nate was, but the idea of putting her hands on him was almost narcotic in its appeal.

She could touch him if she wanted. Hell, she could kiss him senseless. She was adventurous. She was wild. What was stopping her?

Doubt. Doubt was stopping her. Those damned what ifs. What if it went away? What if she couldn't kiss anyone but Nate? Sure, in the last few hours she'd had other people's hands on her hands, her arms and her scalp, but that didn't mean her lips wouldn't trigger a nuclear meltdown. Really, she ought to test it. In the interest of scientific discovery.

Ciara met Joe Jersey's eyes and gave him a flirty little smile.

She'd leave it up to chance. Ciara stacked three chips on top of the number seventeen. If she won, she'd kiss him. If she lost...she'd play again until she won.

Was this how most gambling addictions started? As an enabler to nymphomania?

The ball spun in a dizzying whirl around the wheel. Ciara watched it intently, excitement bubbling up to a rapid boil inside her. The ball rattled off a series of slots, bouncing erratically, then settled suddenly.

Seventeen.

Ciara squealed, jumping up and down, clapping her hands and playing the lucky winner to the hilt. She pounced on the man beside her, wrapped her arms around his neck and planted one full on his mouth.

After Nate returned to the room to find Ciara had vanished, he panicked and began searching the hotel. The last place he expected to find her was at a roulette table in a juicy lip lock with a perfect stranger.

"Ciara."

She sprang away from her new friend, flashing him a bright, unapologetic smile. "Nate! There you are. Look, I won!" She pointed to the roulette table, bouncing in her spiky heels.

"Congratulations," he said grimly. Nate turned to the bastard who'd taken advantage of her excitement.

Who took one look at the expression on Nate's face and immediately held up his hands in surrender. "Hey, buddy, she kissed me. How was I to know you had a prior claim? Am I right?"

Ciara bent over the table, blithely gathering up her chips. She looked cheerful and bright-eyed and not at all like someone who'd just been kissed against her will.

"You kissed him?"

Not that it mattered who'd kissed whom. It was none of his business. *She* was none of his business. Just an informant. So why did he feel like he'd just discovered his favorite puppy played with other little boys when he wasn't around?

Ciara caught his arm and tugged him away from the table, carrying a small stack of plastic money against her chest. "I can kiss him," she gushed.

"That doesn't mean you should," he heard himself snap.

Ciara paused beside an abandoned craps table and tipped her face up to him, a feline smile curving her lips. "Why, Agent Smith. Are you jealous?"

"Of course not."

She went on as if he hadn't spoken. "You're a much better kisser, you know. Joe Jersey over there has an excessive amount of saliva. It was very...moist."

"Good to know."

"It *is* good to know. I can kiss moist men. I've cracked the code, Nate. I can touch people again. Not just you, *people*. Do you know what this means?"

"No." He was still playing catch up on the she's-not-a-thief-and-she-kisses-like-a-siren front. The implications of the touching stuff were beyond him.

"It means I don't have to live like a hermit anymore. It means I'm not a freak. It means I can finally have a *life*." Ciara closed her eyes and shook her head sharply. "God, I can't believe what an idiot I've been. All the time I've wasted just because I didn't try. Just because I didn't *listen*." Her eyes popped open, their black depths sparkling wetly. "That's all it took. All I had to do was stop fighting my own abilities, stop bracing myself for every attack and just accept it. If I didn't want to waste even one more second on regret, I'd be so angry with myself right now."

She didn't look angry. She looked a breath away from laughter or tears, but not angry.

Ciara had been a vibrant force from the second he laid eyes on her, but now it was like the life in her was amplified, like a raw diamond cut and perfectly set to show off every sparkling facet. Before she had been beautiful, now she *shone*.

And there was quite a lot to show.

"What the hell are you wearing?"

Ciara laughed and twirled. "You like? Not bad, eh?"

Not bad. Sweet Jesus. She looked like temptation incarnate in that red dress. It was short and tight and the color of a luscious apple. Eve didn't need a piece of fruit. All she needed was a dress like that.

Ciara clutched her winnings against her ribs, her arm pressing her breasts up like offerings above the low neckline. Nate placed a finger against one narrow strap at her shoulder. He traced the strap down until he brushed the warm upper curve of her breast. Her breath caught, her inky eyes locked on his.

"I like," he murmured. He fixated on her mouth—the smooth curve of it. He'd never noticed before, but her mouth was a little lopsided, quirking up on the right. He wanted to kiss that up-tilted edge, nip the full lower curve and suck it into his mouth.

She stared at his lips, caught in the same moment he was, as the noise in the casino seemed to recede. He leaned down, hypnotized as her tongue snuck out to trace her lips. She rested her free hand on his chest and stretched up to meet him.

A slot machine erupted ten feet away from them, bells and whistles shrieking merrily as some lucky bastard hit the jackpot. Nate didn't even glance in that direction. He was too focused on his own jackpot. But Ciara's eyes flicked over. She gasped. Her spine stiffened.

"Nate," she whispered urgently. "Nate, look. That woman over there. In the pink."

"Is she *the* woman in pink?" He reluctantly gave up on his own payday and straightened, turning to look. At first he just saw the middle-aged couple in matching sweatsuits clapping and jumping next to the slot machine. Then he saw the woman. She was pretty damn hard to miss. She looked like an Austin Powers Bimbot who'd been dunked in Pepto-Bismol. Pink brassiere, pink hot pants, black fishnets and sky-high boots. Her blonde hair was poofed up in a platinum bouffant and silver fake eyelashes sparkled in the flashing lights from the slot machine.

"No," Ciara drawled slowly, "no, that isn't her. But she's dressed just like that. Are there showgirls here?"

Nate shook his head. "No floorshow. Are you sure that isn't her? What are the odds that there are two women here dressed like that?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, a second woman, this one African-American but dressed almost exactly the same way, appeared. She spoke to the bouffant blonde, waving her hands expressively. A fraction of a second later the two women took off, jogging through the casino.

"They're getting away," Ciara yelled. "We have to follow them. They'll lead us right to her." She started sprinting through the casino after them.

Nate swore and began limping after as quickly as he could, using his cane like a pole vaulter's stick whenever possible.

"Come on, Nate," Ciara called over her shoulder, her eyes dancing. "Follow that slut!"

Chapter Nine—In Pursuit of Slut

Ciara tottered as fast as she could in the wake of the pink ladies. Suddenly she had a profound respect for women who could sprint in four-inch heels. Like the pink ladies. Those tramps could book. They must be wearing the Adidas of platform boots.

They dashed through the casino, dodging games and slow-moving gamblers like Olympic hopefuls in skankwear.

Ciara struggled to keep them in sight. As they bobbed, she weaved, and then glanced back over her shoulder. Nate kept pace amazingly well for a guy with only one good leg. He was definitely getting the hang of that cane.

She grinned at him, having too much fun in the slut-chase to match the severe expression on his face. Nate needed to learn to live a little. So what if they were chasing trollops across a massive casino floor in the hopes of locating a specific trollop who knew the location of a stolen necklace? That was no reason not to enjoy the moment.

Ciara nearly crashed into a Wheel of Fortune slot machine and untwisted, deciding it was safer, while running in four-inch heels, to watch where she was going. She rounded a corner and slowed to a stop.

The pink ladies were nowhere in sight. Ciara bent at the waist—she was so damned out of shape—as she scanned the area for a flash of hot pink trampiness.

Nate staggered to a stop at her side.

“Did you see which way they went?” she asked.

He shook his head, panting heavily beside her. At least they were out of shape together. Though Ciara didn’t have the excuse of a heroic injury in the line of duty and being laid up for a month in a lengthy recovery. She just had pathetic muscle mass after spending the last decade of her life floating in her pool.

She would have to start working out. Training. In high heels. Next time she’d be ready for the Olympic skanks.

“Here, hold these.” She divided her winnings into two stacks and shoved them into Nate’s suit-coat pockets. She stretched up as tall as she could, craning her neck for some sign of the skankettes.

In front of them was a row of blackjack tables, off to the left was one of the gourmet restaurants and directly behind them was the darkened, black-velvet-rope-lined entrance to a dance club. Ciara heard the bass beat humming distantly, more a vibration through the soles of her feet than actual sound. A slim

brunette dressed all in black stood at the podium at the front of the velvet-rope line, tapping her manicure against a clipboard.

Ciara tugged Nate's arm and nodded in the hostess's direction. "She must have seen which way they went. Come on."

Ninety seconds later, Ciara was ready to throttle the little hostess—not that she had a good excuse for strangling the twit. She hardly qualified as a hostile witness. It had taken Nate all of fifteen seconds to find out that the pink ladies—Ashley and Monique—had indeed passed this way. In fact, they'd run down into the club. Late for work again, tsk tsk.

There weren't showgirls at the Borgata, but there were certainly go-go dancers.

If the hostess hadn't been dripping drool all over Nate, Ciara might have hugged her for being so helpful. As it was, the brunette was lucky Ciara didn't pull out all of her big Jersey hair. Yes, Nate was a hunky piece of manflesh, but he was *Ciara's* hunky piece of manflesh, thank you very much. At least until they found the necklace.

Ciara dragged Nate away from his newest fan and down the escalator into the club, *mur.mur*. As they descended, the heavy beat rose up to slap them in the face. The club's name was a total misnomer, unless it referred to the range of hearing that would be eliminated inside.

They moved through the dark cave of the entrance. The club, tucked beneath the floorboards of the casino, opened in front of them. In the center of the room, a crowded, sunken dance floor was surrounded by couches and low circular tables. The go-go dancers they'd chased across the casino shimmied atop platform tables strategically placed at the edges of the dance floor.

Directly in front of them, the bouffant blonde dropped down into a feline crouch and straightened with sensual aplomb. Ciara stared. She'd thought the outfits were trashy, flashing every semi-decent inch of skin and then some, but under the strobe light with the beat pounding through her blood, the costume sort of worked and there was a certain style to the go-go dancer's gyrations.

And a distinct sexiness. These women *knew things*.

"I should become a go-go dancer." She spoke the words softly, knowing no one could possibly hear them.

"Do you see her?" Nate shouted over the thundering bass. His arm was tense beneath her fingers, his cane held in a white-knuckled grip.

There were six dancers altogether. All of them in various hot pink porn-star getups, but not one of them was the woman from her vision. Above the dance floor, a wide walkway wrapped around the room. A bar immediately to their left was mirrored by another on the opposite wall. The walls not occupied by bars were lined with shadowed nooks, the curved couches and fabric hangings giving the illusion of privacy.

"Not yet," Ciara shouted back. "Let's dance until she shows."

Nate slanted a glance toward the crowded dance floor and frowned, but Ciara didn't give him a chance to object. She grabbed his cane-free arm—the one she'd been dragging him around by all week—and hauled him toward the pulsating mass of humanity.

He shuffled awkwardly to the music—which she should have expected, really, since a man with a permanent limp could hardly be expected to be graceful. Especially when the nearby dancers were constantly jostling them with misplaced grinds, thrusts and booty bumps.

Nate angled his shoulders to block one particularly enthusiastic flail. Ciara watched as he jerked back the other direction, shoulder-checking another dancer who was bobbing dangerously close on her right. After a few more similar moves, realization smacked Ciara in the forehead with a tire iron.

He was protecting her.

The dance floor was crowded, people bouncing off one another, pushing and squirming, but since she'd come down here *no one had touched her*. He wasn't awkward because of the cane. He was awkward because he was trying to protect her from the casual touches of the other dancers.

Her heart clenched. *They just don't make 'em like that anymore.*

Ciara moved in closer, twining her arms around his neck and sliding her body against his. He looked down at her, a little frown wrinkling his Everybody's All-American brow. Ciara smiled, suddenly feeling dippy and sentimental. "You're the real deal. Aren't you, Agent Smith?"

"What?" he shouted down at her.

Ciara just smiled and mutely shook her head. It was probably a good thing he couldn't hear her. She felt frighteningly sappy at the moment.

The music was anything but sappy. A driving, unapologetic, pulsing invitation to sex. The bass vibrated through the soles of her Ferragamos.

Ciara tucked herself against Nate's chest, brushing aside the lapels of his suit jacket to press closer still. He was warm and hard, strong and reliable. He gave her adventure, but made her feel so safe. He would never let anything happen to her. She could fly as high as she wanted and he would always be there to catch her.

But Ciara wanted more than a safety net. She wanted *flames*. She wanted to be incinerated by passion, melted in the heat of her own need.

The music spurred her on. She arched against Nate, rolling her hips in time to the beat. Her hands roamed over his shoulders, smoothing down over the muscles of his chest and sliding beneath his suit jacket to wrap around his waist. His good leg slipped between hers. Ciara's gasp was lost in the heavy thrum of the music as the pressure of his thigh between her legs sent a spike of pleasure straight to her core. He splayed one hand against the small of her back, keeping her pressed close. Ciara's hips continued to work in rhythm.

Just a dance. It's just a dance.

Ciara's head fell back, her eyes closed. He bent down, his large frame curling protectively around her smaller one, and brushed his rough cheek against hers. She turned her head, seeking his mouth, but he evaded her, his lips moving beneath her jaw and along the column of her throat.

He leaned into her, guiding her backward through the crowd. When her heels hit the steps up off the dance floor, they were forced to break away from one another. She stayed tucked against his chest, beneath his suit jacket, as they swayed together up the steps and toward one of the cozy alcoves along the wall. The first two they came to were already occupied, but the third was blissfully empty.

Nate immediately sat on the low couch, pulling Ciara onto his lap. Her back was to his chest. If she looked through the break in the dark curtains shrouding their alcove, she could see the rest of the club. Which meant if any of those clubbers glanced this way as they walked past, they'd be able to see her, clear as day.

Nate's hand snuck beneath the short skirt of her dress. His other arm wrapped snugly around her ribs, keeping her in place and rubbing against the underside of her swollen breasts. His fingers unerringly found her clit through her drenched panties, and he rubbed the nub in a small circle, the friction and pressure unbearably delicious.

Ciara watched the gap in the curtains, electrified by the thought that they were utterly exposed. She definitely had some latent exhibitionist tendencies. So what if they were in semi-public and anyone could see them? Let the world watch.

Then Nate changed the direction of his circling finger and the world faded into insignificance. All that mattered was his hand, his touch, the drawing ache building inside her, begging for release.

"Oh God." She clung to the arm around her ribs, hanging on for dear life as his fingers worked her closer and closer to that beautiful madness.

"Come on." His voice was dark and rough as he spoke against her ear. His fingers never let up for a second. "Come for me, sweetheart."

"Oh *God*." Her orgasm jolted through her, a slingshot release that sent her flying. Waves of liquid pleasure rippled out to her toes, her fingertips, even her eyelashes. She felt decadent and wild and so damned *alive* she could live forever.

Nate slowly removed his hand from beneath her skirt, smoothing the fabric down. His erection pressed hard against her hip. She'd have to do something about that...

Ciara opened her eyes. Her vision cleared and she glanced at the gap in the curtains, more curious than embarrassed by the idea that someone might have seen them. Her eyes flicked over the gap. No one was looking back at them. A small frisson of relief shimmied down her spine. Maybe she wasn't such an exhibitionist after all. She should grab Nate and take him back up to their room, make good use of that tent he was pitching for her.

Across the room, a new go-go dancer bounced up onto one of the platforms.

A go-go dancer with long, straight blonde hair, silver eyelashes and a pink bustier.

“Oh my God.”

Chapter Ten—Postcoital Sprints

Somewhere between the dunk tank and the roulette wheel, Nate had completely lost control of the situation. He may not always play strictly by the book, but at least he had a nodding acquaintance with the rules. Fingering an informant to orgasm in a public place fell somewhere outside normal Bureau procedure.

But he couldn't regret it. Ciara was worth every second of whatever professional punishment his superiors could dream up. She looked at him like he was her personal miracle. There was never a hint of pity or scorn in her eyes. It was like she didn't even see the cane. And when she didn't see it, it was almost like he didn't feel it.

"Oh my God," she gasped.

Nate smoothed her skirt down over her hip. "Yeah, sweetheart, I know," he said, feeling duly smug.

Ciara shook her head sharply. "No, Nate. Oh my God, that's her. The go-go from my vision. She's right over there."

His smugness curdled. He followed her gaze and saw a familiar-looking platinum blonde in hot pink hooker heels. Nate frowned. Why did she look so damned familiar?

"What do we do? Do you want me to flank her while you read her her rights?" Ciara bounced on his lap.

He winced as her weight bore down on his bad leg. Carefully shifting her toward his good side, he kept his arm firm around her waist so she couldn't launch herself into an impromptu flanking maneuver. "We don't do anything," he said firmly. "We call for reinforcements..." He trailed off as a man the size of a Himalayan mountain in a black Armani suit took up a position at one edge of the go-go platform, glaring at anyone who got too close to the prancing blonde. "*Shit.*"

"Shit?" Ciara asked, with undisguised enthusiasm. "What is it? Do we need to move now? No time for reinforcements?"

"Cool it, Geronimo. There's always time for reinforcements, and we definitely need them now. That big bastard guarding her is a known associate for Sergei Lubov, an infamous Jersey lowlife. I *knew* that asshole was dipping his fingers into more than just drugs and guns these days." And that was why the blonde looked so familiar. She was Lubov's regular arm candy. "I need to call organized crime and get them down here."

"Mafia?" Ciara burbled. "Really?"

He gave her a little shake, squeezing her until she looked back over her shoulder at him. “This isn’t a game, Ciara. These people are genuinely dangerous. No hero bullshit. That isn’t how we do things.”

“How do we do things?”

“We watch. We gather evidence. We *do not* go in guns blazing. Ever.”

Ciara’s eyes flared wide. “Are you packing heat? Right now?”

His erection was still hard as a damn fireplace poker, but he didn’t think that was what she meant. He had no intention of telling her about his ankle holster. “Ciara, it doesn’t matter if I’m packing or not. The only piece of equipment I need right now is a cell phone and a quiet place to call the correct authorities.”

He stood her up and grabbed his cane, shoving himself awkwardly to his feet. Ciara gazed longingly toward the go-go dancer. He could practically see her fantasizing about dive-tackling her and sitting on her until the correct authorities could be bothered to get their asses down here.

“Aren’t you the authority on the necklace?” Ciara asked.

“Not even close, sweetheart. Let’s go find someplace with cell reception and a little less noise.”

He took her hand and began to lead her through the crowded club. Her hand nestled inside his and she gave no indication of pain, but he still wasn’t taking chances with random strangers bumping into her, so it was slow going.

They were only halfway to the door when Ciara’s fingers suddenly clamped down hard on his. “Nate, she’s leaving. Do you think she saw us? Do you think she knows we’re after her?”

Nate craned his neck to look. Ciara was right. The go-go girl in question was indeed hurrying out of the club, leaving her black-suited bodyguard in her dust. “She has no way of knowing who we are. Don’t worry.”

Though that must have been the shortest go-go set in recorded history. Could she have recognized him somehow? Or Ciara?

“She’s getting away!” Ciara jerked her hand out of his and began darting and weaving through the crowd after the departing dancer.

Nate swore and gave chase. Again.

The go-go dancer ran up the escalator back to the casino floor and darted down the wide column-lined halls toward the hotel tower. Ciara chased her every step of the way. Nate scrambled in their wake, trying desperately to keep his little troublemaker in sight.

As soon as he caught up with Ciara, he was going to handcuff her to himself. Or better yet, to a bed. That way she couldn’t possibly get in any more trouble. Jumping in dunk tanks. Kissing random strangers. Chasing go-go dancers and known associates to suspected felons across casinos. How much trouble could one woman get into in a twenty-four-hour period?

The go-go dancer flashed a room key at the security guard checking IDs at the hotel tower and darted past him. Ciara slipped past the guard as a group of noisy tourists distracted him—which was lucky for her

since he couldn't imagine where she could be hiding a room key in that dress. Nate hobbled after them, plucking his own room key from his pocket and flashing it at the guard.

She would have to wait for an elevator. He should be able to catch up.

There were three banks of elevators, each heading to a different range of floors. They knew the dancer was at the hotel, likely with Lubov. Nate would call it in, they'd get a warrant, the hotel manager would tell them the room number and they would recover the necklace from the hotel safe. All he had to do was prevent Ciara from blowing everything.

Ahead of him, Ciara darted into the third bay, the one leading to the top floors with the suites.

Maybe she'd realized the chase was unnecessary and had decided to go back to their suite and take a soak in the tub. Nate limped hurriedly into the far elevator bay—just in time to see Ciara step into the far elevator. His leg was aching like a son of a bitch, but he pushed through the pain and shoved as much weight through it as he could stand, half-running to get to the elevator before the doors closed.

He lurched forward and smacked his cane against the closing door, tripping the sensor and sending the doors springing back open. The blonde go-go dancer leaned against a side wall, looking mildly bored and not at all winded. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he never would have believed she'd just pulled a Flo-Jo across the casino.

Ciara smiled innocently at him as he hobbled inside. The doors slid shut with a whisper-soft sigh. He crowded Ciara into the corner and pushed the button for their floor—two above the one the blonde had pressed. He would physically restrain Ciara if that's what it took to keep her from getting off the elevator with the dancer, and as soon as she was gone, Miss Ciara Liung was going to get an enormous piece of his mind.

She wasn't one of Charlie's freaking Angels, no matter how much she looked like Lucy Liu.

He was mentally rehearsing his tongue-lashing when the elevator binged and the doors slid open.

The sight of three men in black suits with black Glocks trained on them froze the speech in his throat. The go-go dancer pulled a tiny two-shot pistol from God-knows-where and leveled it at Nate's chest. One of the men slapped a hand between the elevator doors to keep them from closing. A second aimed his gun at Ciara's forehead.

The third, a tall fair man with Slavic features, a pink dress shirt and a maroon paisley tie, smiled tightly. His hair was shorter and paler than the photos Nate had seen, but it was undeniably Sergei Lubov.

"Agent Smith," he said, in a strongly accented tenor, "won't you introduce us to your lovely friend?"

Chapter Eleven—Hot Water

As new experiences went, Ciara decided she could have done without being held at gunpoint.

She watched Nate for cues. Would they fly into action, disarming the go-go dancer and knocking the guy blocking the door out of the way so the doors would close before the bullets could fly? It worked in the movies, but she didn't have a high degree of confidence that the movies weren't totally full of shit when it came to close-quarters gunfights. Too many fictional bad guys had appallingly bad aim at point-blank range. Her real-life bad guys were holding their guns like they actually knew which end the little bullet thingies came out of.

Maybe Nate would con them. Convince them they had the wrong guy, that he wasn't this Agent Smith of whom they spoke. Though if they knew anything about him, the cane was a pretty distinctive feature and hard to disguise.

Ciara held her breath, certain Nate would do *something* to save the day. Even knowing it was probably the safest action, she was still a little disappointed when he obediently stepped out of the elevator and asked calmly, "How do you know who I am?"

The head bad guy, who seemed to have latched onto the pink-is-manly trend with unexpected enthusiasm, smiled smugly. "Asking too many questions of the loyal hotel staff, I'm afraid, Agent Smith. Did you honestly expect us to set up a base of operations here without securing the loyalty of the management?"

Ciara's heart tripped, skipping a beat. Why was he telling them about bribes and bases of operations? Didn't he know that no real-life villain told James Bond how he did it?

He did kind of sound like a fictional villain, with his oddly high, strongly accented voice. Boris on helium. If he had delusions of movie arch-villainy, maybe they could use that to their advantage.

"You still haven't introduced us to your friend, Agent Smith."

"She isn't my friend, Lubov," Nate said. "I don't know her. She's just a girl who got in the same elevator."

Sergei's smug smile soured and he gestured to one of the men flanking Nate. The stocky man's arm lashed out. The butt of his gun slammed into the back of Nate's head, dropping him to his knees. Ciara gasped and took an involuntary step toward him, stopping herself before she gave away their relationship.

“I don’t appreciate lies,” Lubov said. “After the display you put on downstairs on the dance floor, you can’t expect me to believe you are strangers.” He waved his gun toward Ciara, beckoning. “Come out of there, my dear. We mustn’t hold the elevator too long. It’s rude.”

Nate tipped his head down in a slight nod—either that or he was trying to stem the blood flowing from the scalp wound at the back of his head. Ciara stepped out of the elevator, followed by the bitch skank who’d lured them into this. So much for feminine solidarity.

Lubov and his merry men led them down the hall and into the suite from her vision. They shoved Nate down onto one of the white couches near the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the marina. He was still bleeding, but Lubov apparently had no appreciation for the difficulty of getting blood out of white upholstery. He directed Ciara toward a nearby chair. She plunked down onto it.

What would Charlie’s Angels do? Besides never get themselves into this situation in the first place.

She was unarmed, surrounded by a Russian Mafioso and his henchmen, Nate was bleeding, and they didn’t even have the necklace to use for leverage. *The necklace...* A spark of an idea flickered to life in Ciara’s mind.

“You can’t shoot us,” Nate said, swaying a little from blood loss. “The FBI knows where I am. You would never get away with it. No matter how loyal the staff is to you.”

“Oh? Are you sure about that? Would the FBI really care about the death of a burn-out who blew his cover? Oh yes, we know all about you, Agent Smith. Maybe you put a bullet in your own brain, yes? Maybe you go a little crazy and put a bullet in this pretty girl’s head before you eat your gun. Which would you prefer? Shall we keep your pretty friend or put her down?”

Lubov approached Nate, the business end of his gun getting closer and closer to his face. Lubov’s henchmen watched, as blasé as if their boss threatened the life of a federal agent every day of the week and twice on Sundays. Ciara couldn’t be blasé.

“If you kill us, you’ll never get the necklace back.”

Lubov paused, his head turning slowly to look at her. “What did you say?”

“The Heart of Monaco. You think it’s locked up in the closet safe, but while you were distracted earlier the third member of our team came in here and snatched it. If you want it back, you’ll have to let us go. Unharmed.”

He hesitated. “I think you are lying,” he said, but he sounded far from certain.

“Then how would I know exactly where the Heart of Monaco is? All of the FBI is out looking for it, but I know it’s right here, in a silver safe about this big on the floor of your closet.” Ciara measured the safe with her hands. “Or at least, it *was*.”

“Tatiana,” Lubov snapped. “Check the necklace.”

The go-go dancer scurried to the bedroom—which at least got one gun out of the room. Three to go. And they didn't have long before the lovely Tatiana discovered Ciara was lying through her teeth. How long did it take to open a safe?

Nate was slumping down farther and farther on the couch, losing more blood every second. He looked like he would pass out at any moment. Lubov turned his back on the wounded agent, studying Ciara.

"How did you know the Heart of Monaco was here?"

Ciara opted for the truth. No one ever believed her anyway. "I'm psychic."

Lubov's face lit. Just her luck he would be the one man on the planet who believed her, no questions asked. "So you're the FBI's secret weapon, are you? You're the reason we've been losing shipments for the last three years. We've been trying to figure out how they do it. Agent Smith, I am in your debt. You brought her right to us."

Nate fainted, his upper body slumping down over his legs.

"Nate!" Ciara cried.

Nate surged to his feet suddenly, catching Lubov unawares. His arm locked around Lubov's throat. He had the Russian's body pressed like a human shield in front of his own and a gun pressed against his temple, all before Ciara could do more than gasp. She recovered quickly, leaping out of her chair and darting behind the couch for cover, just in case Lubov's bodyguards were smart enough to aim at her for leverage.

Huddled behind the couch, she saw the scene play out in the reflection off the window.

"Drop your guns," Nate ordered.

"Do it," Lubov squeaked, and then said something panicked in Russian.

The guards tossed down their guns, but Nate didn't ease his grip on Lubov in the slightest. "Call Tatiana out. Have her throw down her gun."

Nate took no chances. When Tatiana appeared, he had the guards strip down to their underwear and made the go-go dancer tie them to chairs. He didn't call Ciara out from her hiding place until he needed her to check the knots to make sure Tatiana hadn't gone too easy on her friends. That done, Ciara and Nate quickly tied up Lubov and Tatiana, and Nate put in a call to the proper authorities.

Only then did he collapse back onto the couch, slumping down on himself. Ciara had a feeling this time his exhaustion wasn't feigned. She knelt at his side, cradling his face in her hands.

"Are you all right?"

He met her eyes, flashing her that All-American grin. "I'm great," he assured her. "Not bad for a cripple, eh?" There was no bitterness in his voice, just a quiet pride.

He deserved that pride. He had proven, beyond anyone's doubts, that he was not limited by his disability. He'd saved them both, bum leg and all. Movie stars were overrated. Nate was her hero.

She returned his smile. “You were amazing.” The man deserved a reward. Preferably one that involved lots of skin-on-skin touching. But since they had to wait for the white hats to get there and take away the bad guys, they’d have to settle for something less gratifying for now. “Ever wondered what a fifty-carat ruby feels like in your hands?”

Chapter Twelve—Frankenstein Booty Call

Three hours later, after they'd both been bludgeoned by reports and procedure, Ciara and Nate staggered back to their own hotel room, leaving the Heart of Monaco in good hands and the bad guys behind bars.

Ciara sighed and flopped onto her back on the bed. "This was fun."

"Fun? That was your idea of fun?"

"Well...yeah. We make a good team."

"I guess we do." Nate dropped down beside her and groaned. "I've created a monster."

"That's me. The Frankenstein of jewel finders. Rawr."

"You're *no* Frankenstein."

Ciara kept her eyes on the ceiling. The intensity in his voice was overwhelming enough. She didn't think she could handle seeing it in his eyes. She needed to keep things light. She already felt so caught up in him, so close to letting the "L" word trip out of her mouth. She needed the ceiling tiles to keep perspective.

"You know what's funny?" she murmured. "I don't feel like a freak anymore. I don't even think it's because I can touch people now. I think I stopped being a freak the second I stopped living like one. As soon as you bullied me out of my house, I was free."

"I live to serve."

Ciara grinned, reminding herself to keep it light. "Serve and protect, right? Isn't that the motto? You're sure good at it."

"Serve and protect is the cops. We're fidelity, bravery and integrity."

"Oh wow, I like that." She was tempted to put it in their wedding vows. Not that she was getting ahead of herself or anything. But it was hard not to get carried away with a man who lived his life by that motto. Faithful, brave and honorable. That was Nate all over.

Ciara rolled onto her side and studied his profile. He looked like the high school quarterback who'd been seasoned by fifteen years of life. Utterly gorgeous. She couldn't even resent the fact that men got sexier as they aged when she was benefiting from that sexiness.

"We have some unfinished business, you and I," she purred.

"You still threatening to have me thrown off your detail?"

“I might be able to tolerate you.” He’d taken off his suit jacket. She trailed her finger down one firm forearm. “I was talking about a reward.”

He turned his head to meet her eyes. “Your reward for recovering the Heart of Monaco?”

She smiled a slow, sensual smile. “I was thinking of a slightly more personal reward. For the man who saved me tonight.”

“Ah.” He rolled onto his side, facing her. He brushed her hair back over her ear, his eyes locked on her lips. “Don’t I get to reward the woman who stayed calm under pressure and distracted Lubov so I could get the upper hand?”

Ciara licked her lips and leaned closer to him, magnetically drawn. “I think we both deserve to get what we want tonight,” she murmured.

He closed the short distance between them and kissed her. The contact was a symphony inside her mind. The fireworks his touch set off weren’t the painful ones she used to brace herself for, but the sparks of undiluted chemistry.

Nate angled his mouth over hers, deepening the kiss, but he was still moving too slowly for her. Ciara had waited for this for too long. She’d been afraid of never having this closeness, the intimacy of his body tight against hers, his lips warm and sure on hers. She couldn’t be patient now.

She thrust her tongue into his mouth and grabbed his shoulders, pulling his weight over on top of her. Nate pressed her down into the soft mattress, hard and firm against her softness. She grasped two fistfuls of his shirt and yanked, untucking it from his pants and drawing it up so she could slide her hands along the warm, muscular expanse of his lower back.

Nate levered himself up and pulled the shirt off over his head with one swift tug, falling back into the kiss without missing a beat. You had to respect a man with that kind of focus.

Ciara ran her hands up the plane of his back. Each touch was a revelation. His skin burned warm against her fingers, sending waves of heat shooting from her fingertips to her toes. But she wanted more than just to touch him. She wanted him touching her.

Reading her mind, Nate slipped his hands beneath the hem of her dress. He guided the skirt up, his hands skating along the outside of her thighs, over her hips and against the curve of her waist. She reveled in the newness of the touch, but even more in the fact that it was Nate touching her, Nate kissing his way down the line of her throat and the low neckline of her dress.

“More, Nate. I need more.” She kicked off her Ferragamos and hooked one leg over his hip, rocking her pelvis to rub against his erection.

“Demanding little thing, aren’t you?” he grumbled against her breast.

Ciara rolled her head against the soft mattress. She may not ever have a fifty-carat ruby necklace, but she felt like Grace Kelly in this moment. Nate was her blond Cary Grant, smooth and sexy and giving her banter right along with passion. What more could she ask for?

Except for him to get on with it already.

She snuck her hands between them to slowly work down the zipper on his pants.

“Lift your arms,” Nate demanded.

Ciara didn’t want to give up on her noble goal of getting the Fed out of his pants, but the command in his voice sent a tingle down her spine so she obeyed. As soon as her arms were above her head, Nate whipped her dress off. She wasn’t wearing a bra and his eyes locked on her breasts, his hands quickly following his gaze.

She wasn’t big. With her frame, she would have fallen over if she was stacked like a *Baywatch* babe, but Nate didn’t seem to mind her all-too-proportional curves. He cupped her breasts, raising them to his mouth. The touch felt exquisite, but it wasn’t enough.

She tilted her hips up against his again, rubbing his erection. “Come on, Nate. No more Mr. Nice Guy.”

He groaned. “I thought women wanted the nice guy.”

“Nuh-uh. Bad boys all the way. Be bad, Nate.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He stripped off his pants and her panties and slipped on a condom at light speed, falling back onto her, finally nothing but skin against skin. Ciara closed her eyes as the “Ode to Joy” exploded inside her head, a symphonic eruption of bliss. Nate settled himself between her legs, notching his erection to her entrance.

This is it.

She caught his mouth in a kiss and clutched his shoulders, holding on too tightly. She felt some discomfort as he started working himself inside her, but it didn’t merit tears or hysterics. What was the big deal? The latex of the condom felt more foreign than anything, an oddly clinical static friction.

Nate froze, pushing up on his forearms and breaking the kiss. He must have noticed the way she’d stiffened up. Ciara could have kicked herself for not playing it cool.

“Are you—?”

“Don’t say it. I hate the V word.” She wasn’t a *virgin*. She was just a girl who’d never had sex. There was a difference. She frowned up at him. “Was I required to tell you or something?”

“No, I should have... It makes sense.” He touched his forehead to hers. “Are you okay?”

“I’m good. Can we get on with it?”

Nate gave a startled laugh. “Always the romantic. C’mere.” He caught her mouth and drew her into a drugging kiss. Her body quickly adjusted to his presence...in fact, it started to feel pretty damn good. By the time he began flexing his hips, withdrawing and pressing back again, she was squirming beneath him, chasing the heat of his touch. Ciara caught his rhythm, learning when to tighten, when to push against him and how to tilt her hips so he hit that sweet spot high inside her.

“Is your...leg...okay?” she asked between panting breaths.

“Uhn.” He continued to pound into her, faster and harder, so Ciara decided that must be a yes. Which was a good thing because she didn’t know what she would have done if he’d said no. She was so close. Sensation seemed to be flowing both in and out of her, touch pressing in, and desire pressing out. They left nowhere for her to go.

She came in a dizzying rush, pleasure pounding through her in a decadent explosion. Nate groaned and stiffened over her, his muscles locking as he followed her into oblivion.

Epilogue—How to Steal a Heart

Special Agent Nathan Smith banged on the door of 1134 Honeydew Circle, and Ciara ran to throw it open. She greeted him at the door, wearing nothing but a towel and a smile.

Ciara waved as one of the neighborhood kids wheeled past on a tricycle, his mother in hot pursuit.

Nate bent to drop a quick kiss onto her mouth and stepped past her into the house. “Kids in this neighborhood are going to grow up with a warped sense of reality, thinking every cul-de-sac has a sexy Asian chick who answers her door half-naked.”

Ciara flipped the door closed and dropped the towel, striking a flirty pose. “Is this better?”

Forty-five minutes later Nate gently rolled Ciara off his chest and reached for his pants. “One of these days I will last more than five minutes in your house without jumping you.”

“And what a sad day that will be.” Ciara rose to her feet and collected her towel.

Their Atlantic City adventure was over two months in the past, but life had certainly not returned to the old status quo. She still found treasures in her pool for the FBI or the other clients Karma lined up, but she wasn’t housebound. She made sure she got out of the house every day, and recently Nate had begun making noises about taking her to his hometown of San Francisco. Every day was a new adventure now that the door she’d shut on her life was open again.

Nate was still her primary liaison with the FBI, but he wasn’t limited to babysitting her. He assisted on other cases, though he would always need the cane. Ciara had to admit she was relieved he wouldn’t be doing any more dangerous undercover work. She had plans for his studly body. She didn’t want any more bullet holes in it.

“I brought you a movie.” Nate collected the bag he’d dropped at the door. “I noticed you didn’t have *How to Steal a Million*. Figured that one would be right up your alley.”

Ciara planted her hands on her hips. “Are you questioning my moral fiber, Agent Smith?”

“It’s all about a gorgeous, reckless, free-spirited woman bumbling around in a major burglary and the man who tries to keep her out of trouble. Sound familiar?”

She laughed and draped her arms around his shoulders. “Is that what you do, Nate? Keep me out of trouble?”

“Someone has to. Might as well be me. At least then I get to share the Barcalounger.”

“You only love me for my furniture.”

“But I *do* love you.”

Her breath caught, something sweet and warm unfurling in her chest. It was the first time either of them had said it. Ciara took a deep breath. “I love you back.” She felt like she was leaping off a cliff as she said the words, free-falling without a parachute.

Luckily, she was the kind of girl who lived for adventure. Love was the biggest one yet.

About the Author

Vivi Andrews lives in Alaska when she isn't indulging her travel addiction. She's currently hard at work on her next paranormal romance. For more about her books or the exploits of a nomadic author, please visit her website at www.viviandrews.com or stop by her blog at viviandrews.blogspot.com. Vivi also loves to hear from readers and invites you to email her at vivi@viviandrews.com.

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Serengeti Shifters, Book 3

Mara Leonard is through hitting the snooze button on her biological clock. The Three Rocks Pride schoolteacher is ready to get serious about starting a family, and she needs a serious man to make that happen.

Regrettably, that means crossing less-than-serious Michael Minor off her list of potential mates. Michael is impulsive and passionate, but his spontaneity leaks into shapeshifting whenever his emotions run high—a tendency he should have outgrown long ago. As a sex buddy, he's delicious. Daddy material? Disqualified.

Michael is blindsided by Mara's rejection. Nine years separate them, and his genetic malady means no one in the pride treats him as an adult. But if she thinks he'll simply slink away to lick his wounds while she steps into the arms of another man, she has seriously underestimated him.

The tricky part will be convincing his over-analytical lover that he's more than a disposable sex toy. That real bravery means tearing up her damn checklist and following her heart. And doing it without letting their explosive sexual chemistry expose the Pride's secrets to the outside world.

Warning: This book features break-up sex, make-up sex, a lioness who's a cougar and a hot young lion who's grown up in all the right ways. Note: All electrical shocks are purely metaphorical.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Serengeti Lightning:

He'd wanted tonight to be perfect. This date was his chance to prove he deserved her, to show they were more than just hot sex. He knew she didn't think he was steady enough to be her mate, but he'd hoped to prove her wrong tonight.

Instead, all he'd proven was that he hadn't changed at all.

His sister, Ava, would remind him it wasn't his fault. He couldn't help it. The pride doctor said Michael was missing a neural inhibitor that drew the line between animal and man.

The science was small comfort. He would never be worthy of the woman curled against his side. How long could he expect her to stay with someone who could never give her the stability she craved? One more month? Two? Then who would she run to?

Michael forced the thought of the man who would take his place out of his head. Jealousy was savage—more likely than any other emotion to bring on a shift. He needed to get her back to the ranch, back onto pride lands, where a loss of control wouldn't expose them all.

He started to set her away from him, preparing to load her into the front seat, but her scent curled around him. Michael froze in place, his hands tight on her. He barely managed to keep his claws from snapping out.

Intermingled with the sweet twist of jasmine was the sinuous spice of lust. He could taste her desire on the air. While he'd been contemplating his sabotage of their relationship, Mara had apparently been thinking more much luscious thoughts. *Naughty girl.*

"Michael?" She spoke softly, a whisper on the warm spring breeze, but he felt that sigh of sound like a fist around his cock.

She slipped between him and the SUV, rubbing her body against his front every inch of the way.

Over the last few months, they'd learned one another's wants and needs. At first, they'd both assumed they would eventually grow tired of each other, but familiarity had only intensified each experience. They'd learned to play to their personal vices. He knew exactly how to touch her to get her wet in a heartbeat. And she knew he went hard at just the idea of pinning her to things—walls, doors, slippery shower tiles. He couldn't seem to get enough of crowding her against firm surfaces until she had no choice but to yield her softness to him.

Michael leaned into her, looming over her and pressing her back against the door until he heard the telltale catch in her breath. She loved this too. Mara may be dominant, but she almost never wanted to be on top. She wanted the man who would push her until she gave in, trusting her pleasure to his strength. She wanted *him*.

Now if only he could convince her their compatibility didn't end at the bedroom door.

Heavy-lidded eyes beckoned him. "Your wildness makes me feel wild," she purred.

Michael hesitated. Mara was never reckless. She reasoned things out and made the good decision, every time. So there was absolutely no explanation for her current behavior.

He had calmed. He was ready to take her home. All she had to do was hop in the car and drive back to the safety of the ranch. So why was she inciting him?

She urged him forward and he followed her lead. He bore her back against the metal wall of the SUV until the vehicle rocked slightly. She seemed to bask in the warmth of his body, drawing him tighter against her, if that was even possible. A small, sinful curve of a smile flashed out around her mouth.

Was she thinking what he was thinking? If he took her here, against the Cherokee, would they tip it? He knew he shouldn't want to try, but was captivated by the image teasing his thoughts. When she bit her lip, he wanted to bite it for her then suck that plump curve into his mouth.

"We should go." His voice was as rough as the gravel beneath their feet, but he kept his hands gentle as they stroked down her sides, over the flare of her hips, pausing above the hem of her skirt.

They *should* go. He should back away. He could yank up that little skirt, wrap those long legs around his hips and fuck her senseless just as soon as they were back on pride land. A fucking parking lot, no

matter how late it was, no matter how deep the shadows, was no place for this kind of game. He gripped her hips, fully intending to step away, but Mara—never, ever reckless Mara—forced his hand.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pushed up onto her toes and captured his mouth in a ravenous, open-mouthed kiss. She begged him with her mouth, drawing him into her madness with each longing pull of her lips and strong sweep of her tongue. Or was it his madness she was surrendering to? Right now, he didn't know or care. Her willing heat fried his last working brain cells and he fell into instinct and need.

Michael took command of the kiss. He sucked that luscious lip and gently scraped his teeth across it. His hands fisted in her skirt, jerking the stretchy fabric up, and Mara sighed into his mouth. God, he loved the noises she made, the little murmurs and sighs, not quite caught in her throat. She was musical in her passion, an instrument his fingers loved to pluck and strum.

The skin of her thighs was satin beneath his fingers. He wrapped his hands around the backs of her thighs. His fingertips brushed against her heat and he hissed out a curse.

She wasn't wearing panties. And she was dripping already. His slightest touch called forth another rush of moisture. Her need hit his nostrils, fogging his already blurry thoughts.

With one swift pull, he lifted her. Her legs wrapped snugly around his hips. He notched his denim-covered erection against her pussy, but he didn't push like he wanted to, concerned about the rough fabric against her sensitive flesh. He shouldn't have worried. Mara ground herself on him, tearing her lips away from his to gasp out his name.

"Easy," he murmured into the hair at her temple, barely recognizing his own voice. He slid his hand between them and slicked a finger through her folds. The touch was designed to be more soothing than arousing. He wanted to wind her up a little tighter before he let her take off.

Vlad the Impaler? Don't make her laugh...

Feral Hunger

© 2010 Stephanie Bedwell-Grime

Vlad is un-living proof that even a shy guy with the unfortunate name of Leslie can remake himself. Vampire, cad, player, he embraces it all without a pesky thing called a conscience. Until he receives a “special delivery” on his doorstep. A woman on the brink of death. One look at the sexy blonde, and his inner Leslie—his long-forgotten conscience—moves him to do the right thing and save her life.

One minute Jaelyn is enjoying a night out at a club. The next, she's under a brutal vampire attack. Adjusting to her new life as one of them is hard enough without the added charm of Vlad's grumpiness with the whole situation.

Instead of sending Jaelyn on her merry way, Vlad gives in to another totally uncharacteristic urge—to solve the mystery of who assaulted her, and why whoever it was dumped her at his place. There must be a connection, and it surely can't have anything to do with their budding attraction.

But delving into a dangerous vampire underworld could remake their undead lives once again. Permanently.

Warning: Contains hot and heavy coffin action.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Feral Hunger:

Vlad reached his apartment door and sighed with relief. No police tape, no knot of blue-uniformed officers crowded the hallway. He'd met up with one of his usual donors at a nearby club and fed as quickly as possible. All the while, worry had gnawed at his gut. Still, things seemed quiet as he arrived home. His shoulders slumped as the tension left them and he felt in his pocket for his keys.

A scream pierced the heavy wooden door. He flung it open to find the blonde sitting up on his couch and staring at him in complete horror.

She had sea-foam green eyes, he noted abstractedly as she centered him in her gaze.

Vlad gave her what he hoped was a reassuring expression. But in doing so, he smiled a little too broadly, showing a hint of fang. Big mistake. She screamed again.

The last thing he needed was concerned neighbors in the hallways. He rushed toward her and clamped a hand over her mouth, not knowing what else to do. She bit him, hard enough to draw blood. He snatched his hand back. Her scream burst free.

“Shh!” He tried for a more human-looking smile. Usually, he kept his fangs in plain sight. Women liked them. At least the kind of women he favored liked them. The blonde wasn't fooled. She shrieked even louder.

Vlad covered her mouth with a vise-like grip. It served to muffle the sound, but not much. *No good deed goes unpunished*. It had been his personal motto for some time now. Not that he was often prone to good deeds. He brought his face down close to her ear. “Look,” he said the word with as much gentleness as he could muster. “I know what you’re thinking, but I’m not the one who did this to you.”

Her eyes widened. He suspected she didn’t believe him, but she fell silent. She had no particular reason to believe him. He had done things to her, things she probably wasn’t going to appreciate once she grasped their full significance. Like making her a vampire.

“How do I know that?” she inquired against his palm.

He let his breath go in a rush. “You don’t. So you’re going to have to take my word that I found you unconscious on my doorstep.”

She struggled in his grasp. He tightened his grip. At least she didn’t bite him again, Vlad thought with relief. “If I’m going to help you, I need you to stop screaming and listen to me.”

She grew still. Silence stretched between them.

“Can I move my hand?”

She nodded hesitantly.

He drew his hand away, but kept it close, just in case.

She was still staring at him with those startling eyes. “You’re a—a—” She tried to scuttle away from him again, but he held her tight.

“Vampire,” he supplied and sincerely hoped she didn’t scream again. “But I’m not the vampire who hurt you.”

She studied his face and he waited while she perused him. It was often that way with women. They found his looks pleasing. Many of them had told him so. They found his dark brown curls appealing and his even darker brown eyes more so. Apparently not this one though, because she was staring at him with something close to horror.

A powerful attraction is the last thing these arch enemies need. Or is it?

The Trouble with Curses

© 2008 Anara Bella

Selena Tremayne is different. For one thing, how many vampires do you know faint at the sight of blood? Despite the problems her “differences” cause, she’s grateful. It means she’s not an all-out-evil killing machine. It also means she can’t afford to let anyone get too close. And a guy like Rafe, delicious as he is, is to be avoided at all costs.

Rafe Hunter is a vampire slayer, an odd job thrust upon him by dint of birth. And with his augmented abilities, no one else does it better. Those abilities run into a major short-circuit, however, when he meets Selena. The mysterious beauty clouds his every instinct—something he can ill afford in his line of work. Because of her, his quarry has somehow slipped out of his grasp. Twice.

Coincidences are piling up, and he can’t help but wonder if simple lust is the culprit. Or if it’s something deeper—with dangerous repercussions that extend beyond anything either of them imagined...

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Trouble with Curses:

“Okay, Rafe. I know you’re back there. You may as well show yourself.”

Nothing.

“I have no intention of letting you find out where I live, so you have nothing to gain by following me. I’ll wander around all over town all night long before I’ll show you where I live.”

A dark shadow separated itself from the wall. “How did you know I was here?”

His rich, deep voice shivered down her spine in its usual intoxicating way. “I have a sixth sense about these things.”

“Has to be something like that because I’m damned good at what I do. No one’s ever caught me tailing them before.”

She threw him a quizzical look. “You do this often, do you?”

He chuckled. “Actually, I do. I’m a private investigator.”

Well, that explained it. If she hadn’t *felt* him behind her, she wouldn’t have known. “Just my luck.”

“I didn’t intend for you to ever find out I’d followed you home tonight. I was just going to make sure you got in safely and leave.”

That would have been great except he’d still have found out where she lived. “That’s really nice, but I already told you that I’m fine. I don’t need you checking up on me.”

She heard rather than saw him shrug. One of the perks of having amazing hearing.

“Sorry. My father always taught me that you took care of a lady. Made sure she got home safe and sound.”

“But I wasn’t your date, so I’m not your responsibility.”

“Doesn’t matter. Look, Selena, whether you like it or not I like you, and I want to get to know you a helluvalot better. I won’t give up on you anytime soon, it’s just not my way so you may as well give in and give me a chance.”

“And I have no say in the matter?”

“Yes and no.”

Despite herself she laughed. “Meaning?”

“You’ve already decided. Your heart and body have already said yes. It’s only your mind that refuses to give in.”

“Unfortunately for you, it’s my mind that’s got the deciding vote.” The second the words passed her lips she wished them back. She’d as much as admitted to what he said.

He shook his head. Stepping closer, he reached out and cupped her cheek. “No, it doesn’t. *This* is the real deciding factor.”

She felt his sweet breath on her face just moments before his lips gently brushed across her own. They were feather-light and warm, at first coaxing, then growing more insistent as her response became evident.

She knew she should push him away, but she couldn’t seem to make herself do it. She’d been fantasizing about kissing Rafe from the moment she’d first heard his voice trickle over her senses. Now that it was happening, the last thing she wanted to do was stop him.

Her hands developed a mind of their own. Happily, they explored everything they could reach, from his hard biceps to his strong neck and finally ended up clutching his tight ass for everything she was worth.

She was right in her initial assessment—he was most definitely sex-on-legs. And right now, with his erection nestled between their bodies, she wanted nothing more than to traverse the very path that led to what felt like his very impressive sex.

She moaned into his mouth and ground her hips against him, feeling him return the exquisite pressure. Their tongues danced along each other, questing, exploring, enticing. Her breath caught. Blood pounded in her ears, all but igniting in her veins. She tried to tell herself it was just a kiss, nothing more, but who was she kidding? She’d never felt anything that came close to this kiss before.

Everything about him struck a chord with everything she was, and everything she wanted for herself, but was too afraid to take.

With an answering groan, his mouth started eating at hers, their tongues now melding together.

Tasting.

Needing.

Wanting.

Oh Lord, how she wanted. She wanted it all with this guy. Sex without a doubt, but the terrifying thing was she wanted more than that. She could deal with just the physical. In fact, Anne was probably right that all she needed was a good, long night of hot and heavy sex.

But with Rafe, she found herself dreaming of the happily-ever-after, and there was no happily-ever-after for her. There couldn't be because of what she was.

Pushing him away with a determination she didn't even know she possessed, she stepped back. Did she have the same stunned expression on her face he did? With disgust, she realized she must.

Neither said anything. They couldn't. Both of them were breathing so hard you'd have thought they'd been running for their lives. Then again, maybe they had. Rafe, because he was chasing after her. Her, because she was striving to get away from his magnetic attraction.

The whole thing was ridiculous.

"Why can't you just leave me alone?" Damn her voice's quavery betrayal.

He reached out and skimmed his thumb across her lips. "Because I can't."

She shook off his touch and his hand dropped away. "That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I can give you."

Selena threw her hands up in frustration. "What am I going to do with you?"

An utterly wicked chuckle erupted from him. "I can think of a few things."

"I'll just bet you can." So could she, although she'd never let him know it.

Despite her resistance, he pulled her into his arms and held her close. "Stop fighting this, Selena. At least give us a chance."

It felt so good to be held in his arms. She felt warm, secure and cherished. She nuzzled into his shoulder and inhaled his comforting scent.

How was it possible to feel so comfortable with a man and yet be so turned on you wanted to screw him senseless at the same time? It didn't make sense.

She sighed and snuggled in closer. "You need to go away."

His arms tightened, drawing her even closer. "Whatever you say. Just as soon as I see you home."

"You're not going to give in on this, are you?"

He kissed her forehead. "Nope."

"Bastard."

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