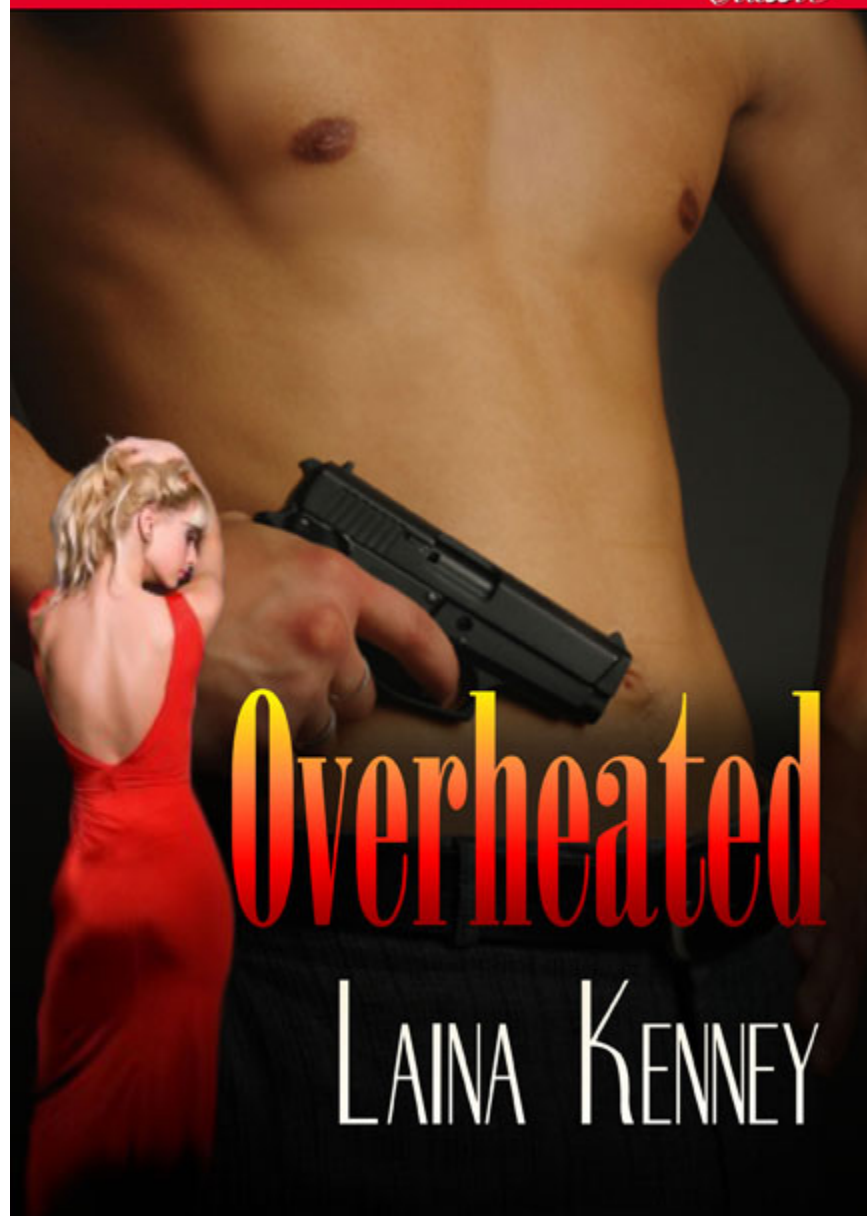


SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*



DIG Security

Overheated

After moving to escape a controlling ex, shy Sara James takes a job with a personal security firm, intent on settling down. But her sudden hot attraction to her dark and dangerous new boss is a complication she cannot afford--or understand.

Former Army Ranger and Security Specialist Dash Williams takes one look at his new employee and falls hard. But how can he approach a woman who outwardly ignores him while her soft, yearning eyes send another message entirely? His dominant instincts fire to life, and when Sara is plagued by a depraved stalker, he steps in to protect the woman he wants to claim as his own.

As they work together to stay one step ahead of the stalker, Dash realizes that his need to take over and protect will not help Sara have confidence in her own abilities. So he goes against his own primitive instincts and his training to teach her to protect herself and reclaim her freedom. The only problem is, when the danger is over, how will Dash ever let Sara go?

Genre: Contemporary, Romantic Suspense

Length: 22,695 words

OVERHEATED

DIG Security

Laina Kenney

EROTIC ROMANCE



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com

ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:

Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the U.S. Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

If you find a Siren-BookStrand e-book being sold or shared illegally, please let us know at **legal@sirenbookstrand.com**

A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

OVERHEATED

Copyright © 2010 by Laina Kenney

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-019-1

First E-book Publication: November 2010

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

All cover art and logo copyright © 2010 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

www.SirenPublishing.com

Letter to Readers

Dear Readers,

If you have purchased this copy of *Overheated* by Laina Kenney from BookStrand.com or its official distributors, thank you. Also, thank you for not sharing your copy of this book.

Regarding E-book Piracy

This book is copyrighted intellectual property. No other individual or group has resale rights, auction rights, membership rights, sharing rights, or any kind of rights to sell or to give away a copy of this book.

The author and the publisher work very hard to bring our paying readers high-quality reading entertainment.

This is Laina Kenney's livelihood. It's fair and simple. Please respect Ms. Kenney's right to earn a living from her work.

Amanda Hilton, Publisher
www.SirenPublishing.com
www.BookStrand.com

DEDICATION

To Scott, for supporting all the different things I do, and the ‘different’ way I do things. Thanks.

OVERHEATED

DIG Security

LAINA KENNEY

Copyright © 2010

Chapter 1

“Come on, Sara, don’t give up.”

Dash looked up from his computer to see his general manager coming down the hall with the newest employee of DIG Security.

Walking beside his friend and manager was the sweet-faced, curvy little blonde who didn’t seem to realize she had caused havoc with the single men in the company. He had never noticed before what dogs his two partners could be, but all of them were reacting to Sara in ways he hadn’t seen from them since their wild days in the Army Rangers together. They had been young and crazy and had occasionally shared a woman, giving her as much pleasure as she could stand, but there would be no sharing with Sara.

Dash almost growled at the thought. If Sara James wanted a new man, it would be Dash alone. His cock twitched at the thought, ready and willing.

He had never run such intensive security checks on one of his employees before Sara. It amused him to see she had never had so much as a speeding ticket. He had never obsessed about a female before, either, but the past four months had changed his outlook. Usually, the women were coming on to him, and he didn’t have to do anything but nod for his bed to be occupied. But little Sara hardly

spoke to him. And whenever he spoke to her, she answered politely and precisely and then sidled away at the first chance. With anyone else he might have tried to force the issue, making her acknowledge him as a man, but the truth was Sara was different from the women he had known in the past.

He had tried to respect her choice and keep his distance until he could figure out how to approach her, but found himself taking lunch at Morrissey's down the block almost daily because Sara was there with some of his staff. Hell, he left on time every day now just so he could walk behind her all the way to the parking lot. She had the sweetest, roundest ass he had ever seen, and the thought of squeezing those smooth globes while he took her from behind had him in a sweat and battling a raging hard-on. He always watched her drive away and had once even followed at a discrete distance to see where she was living.

Gotta stop that shit, he thought, even as he jumped up and moved out into the hall to follow the ladies to lunch.

"I think you should find someone who will actually be nice to you," Carolyn, his manager, was saying. "Not all men are creeps."

Sara shrugged, obviously uncomfortable.

Dash's heart sped up. Was Sara having trouble with a boyfriend? He could give the guy a little attitude adjustment, free of charge. Or get rid of him and take his place. Yeah, that was more like it.

"I'm completely serious, Sara. Look, if your ex is coming on too strong, why don't you speak to Dash? He'll understand. Security is his business, after all."

Sara looked flustered. "I can't tell my new boss that I'm scared of my own shadow. It's nothing."

Ah, not a current boyfriend but an ex. Even better. Dash wanted to jump in and tell Sara that he would be more than happy to fix her problem. He would be particularly happy if it involved punching this asshole of an ex. He was already itching to do just that. He pushed his hands into his pockets to keep from grabbing Sara and hauling her

into his arms where she would never have to be afraid again. His finely honed sense of timing said it wasn't the right moment.

"It's not nothing. Instincts are important, Sara. You're not sleeping and you hardly eat. You can't deny that. When you spoke to me, it was because you knew something was wrong." Carolyn was speaking softly now, but firmly, clearly in full protective mode.

Carolyn had been one of his top agents for several years, until a bad break suffered in a ground chase with an attacker had nearly destroyed her ankle. Four surgeries had made it usable, but nothing would give her the speed she had once enjoyed. She had voluntarily moved into the administrative side of the business, and she was the best damned business manager Dash could imagine. Nothing escaped her notice.

"Last week, you said some of your stuff was missing. That means he was in your apartment, Sara. And now the dead sparrow? He's trying to terrorize you into taking him back. Talk to Dash."

"No, I can't tell Dash." Sara's voice was thin and too high. Her whole body was tense. She acted like it would be unthinkable to speak to her boss about a personal problem.

It was all Dash could do to keep from roaring in anger. Some psycho was after sweet Sara? No damned wonder she was so skittish around him. He had thought she just wasn't ready to acknowledge the sizzling chemistry between them, but it was much more complicated than that.

"You damn well just did tell me," he bit out, moving up between the women. Sara visibly started, shocked to see him behind them. Carolyn just looked smug.

"You can fill in all the sick details over lunch, and don't bother trying to tell me it's nothing," he continued in a harsh tone when he saw Sara's mouth open. She edged away from him, trying to put Carolyn between them. Dash snagged her arm, keeping her right beside him. With his other hand, he flipped open his cell phone.

"Isaac, we have a situation. Sara's ex is a stalker, might have

already broken into her place.”

There was a pause as Dash listened, his eyes fixed firmly on Sara, almost daring her to pull away from him.

* * * *

Sara glanced at Carolyn, who was listening avidly to the conversation. Sara felt weak at the thought of her gorgeous boss knowing of her humiliating problem. Dash Williams was so competent, so incredibly in control of his company and his life. How could he understand her inability to deal with one persistent ex-boyfriend? No, she couldn't involve him in this. He would feel obligated to help her, making it impossible to keep a professional distance from him.

It would be too tempting to just curl up in those strong arms and hide from the whole world. Sara had enough trouble keeping her inexplicable attraction to her boss hidden as it was. His vivid masculinity brought out all her previously dormant feminine instincts. She felt so magnetically drawn to him she had to coach herself every day not to let it show in the office.

“Yeah, the son of a bitch left a dead bird for her to find.”

The memory of that poor little sparrow, neck obviously broken, lying on her bed when she got home, was enough to make Sara queasy. She hadn't slept last night, hadn't eaten breakfast this morning, her stomach too anxious to settle. Now she was feeling the effects of exhaustion and shock, her thoughts whirling with this new humiliation, the conversation fading in and out as she concentrated on staying upright.

“...full investigation on this jerk.” Carolyn's voice was rock steady.

Dash was nodding in agreement, his ear still to the phone. “Yes, tell Grange, and pull him off his case. I don't care. One of the others can handle it. Sara needs round the clock until we can get a handle on

this thing.”

Some of the words penetrated the gathering fog in Sara’s mind. She needed round the clock men? She almost laughed. Round the clock men would be the last thing she needed, especially of the huge variety, like Dash and his partners. No man really needed to be that big, that gorgeous, but the three founders of DIG Security, Dash, Isaac and Grange, were tall, broad, and dangerous former Army Rangers. Except wasn’t there some saying about “once a Ranger, always a Ranger”?

The bodies these men guarded were the safest people on earth, Sara thought muzzily, because who would dare to cross them? The team of three men was so good that the Army still called them in from retirement to do special training exercises with new recruits. The list of their specialties was long and downright frightening.

She tugged at her arm still firmly in Dash’s grip. He only pulled her closer until she was almost in his arms. Although her head was spinning, she knew she was exactly where she had most wanted to be. The sensation was too much.

Really, she needed to sit down for just a minute. There was no air in this hallway. Her eyes rolled back and she drifted out.

* * * *

Dash felt another strong tug on his arm and turned to speak sharply, but Sara was ash white and sagging. He swore, quickly tossing the phone to Carolyn, and swung Sara up into his arms.

He started back to his office with his precious bundle, cursing luridly in the gentlest voice he could manage. Carolyn put the phone to her ear and joined the conversation with Isaac without missing a beat, just as he knew she would. She understood security, knew what to expect, and would be pleased that her new friend would finally be getting the help she so desperately needed.

Chapter 2

Striding into his office, Dash nudged the door shut with his foot before depositing his armful of woman on the leather sofa. The poor little thing was coming around now, moaning and rolling her head. He got an ice-cold lime soda out of his fridge and popped the top. Easing her up with one brawny arm behind her head, he put the can to her lips.

“Try to take a sip, honey,” he murmured, keeping his voice to a deep, soothing rumble..

She managed to swallow some soda as he tipped the can repeatedly, eyes fluttering open as the sugar started to hit her system. She gazed at him with such trust, letting him support her head, his hand buried in her silky hair.

She had the most beautiful hair, he thought absently, so soft and baby fine. The golden wisps moved with each breath because he was so close to her, but he couldn’t move away. Not now, maybe not ever. She needed him now, not only to protect her, but to show her how much pleasure a man could bring to his woman. And make no mistake, she was going to be his.

It might take some time to convince her, but he was in her life to stay. The only thing that could stop him was if she said no. Then he would back off, but he had seen the hint of warmth behind the shyness in her eyes, and he didn’t think she would refuse him if he could just find the right approach. He sometimes caught her watching him, and the combination of curiosity and feminine heat in those big, dark eyes was enough to drive him out of his mind.

* * * *

Sara pushed herself up against the back of the couch, taking the cold can of soda from Dash's hand and sipping cautiously. She studied the can, refusing to look at her most perfect fantasy on his knees before her.

Her hands were trembling, but it wasn't from fear now. Not with Dash so near that she could count his lush, black eyelashes. Those angel-blue eyes had lured her in the very first day. Eyes like that, a deep, dark voice, and the widest shoulders of any man she had ever seen. It was overkill. And he towered over her five-four frame by nearly a foot.

The shivers that his large size caused in her were not from fear, though—not remotely.

Sara had been hiding her deep attraction for him, knowing firsthand how the act didn't live up to the advertising in the sex game. Oh, Martin had seemed to enjoy it well enough, but not Sara. It was only one of the reasons she had finally left Martin. He had blamed her for the failure, and she had believed he was right. She wasn't like other women, he said. She was too delicate, too refined to be truly passionate, he said, and he liked her that way.

But she didn't like it, didn't feel comfortable with it, and so she had left, thinking to live alone. The idea held some appeal. Martin couldn't seem to understand that she was serious about their break-up, so she eventually changed cities, changed jobs, and generally tried her best to disappear. Out of sight, out of mind, she was hoping.

But when she looked at her new boss, or stood close enough to feel the heat from his big body, or smelled his musky male scent when he came in from his morning run, she didn't feel refined. She felt...overheated. She was starting to wonder if maybe she had been wrong about her lack of reaction as a woman. The warmth of her constant response to this man felt strangely good after a lifetime of feeling cold. And his nearness now was making those new sensations

so hard to ignore.

* * * *

Dash took the empty soda can and set it aside. His eyes never left Sara. He watched her pull herself up, trying to put some mental distance between them again, and his instincts rebelled. He had carried her back to his cave, and he was keeping her. He felt just that primitive about it. She belonged to him, and it was time to let her know it.

He leaned in close to her face, and when her wide, dark eyes flew to his, he smiled slowly, reassuringly. He touched his lips to hers gently, so gently, brushing back and forth over her soft mouth. He settled in right there, taking his time.

She was effectively trapped between the sofa and his body, unable to move away, so he took care not to frighten her. He just continued to move his mouth over hers, waiting long moments until she sighed before he deepened the kiss.

When he slipped his tongue into her mouth, Sara went limp from the shocking pleasure. He's tasting, she thought incoherently. He's tasting me. And his own taste was dark after the bright lime of the soda. His unexpected tenderness was compelling, coming from such a big, utterly masculine man. Her thoughts grew hazy as she surrendered to a depth of feeling she had never before experienced.

Dash felt her tense muscles relaxing, felt her leaning into his kiss, and his cock leaped to full hardness. He almost groaned aloud at the rush, knowing he was way ahead of her, knowing he might have to coax her along. If that bastard ex was the kind of idiot Dash thought he was, little Sara probably hadn't felt much pleasure with him.

Maybe she had never known pleasure with a man at all. That would make her almost a virgin in Dash's eyes. His heart was suddenly pounding in his chest. He could show her how it should be, give her a pleasure she had never imagined. And he would start now.

Smoothing his hands up her sides, he cupped her breasts in his big hands and squeezed gently, lightly massaging her sweet flesh. He played with her breasts, rubbing and chafing her nipples through the two layers of fabric. Her low moan almost made him come. Christ, where was his fabled control when he needed it most? He had never been so close to losing it, and he had barely kissed her.

Sara squirmed against the butter soft leather, and her knees parted. Wasting no time, Dash moved between them, forcing them further apart to accommodate his large frame. He wondered if she would pull away, but her head fell back and her legs rose to embrace him, sliding against his hips and pulling him closer to her heat.

God, he could smell the luscious scent of her arousal. It made him salivate thinking of putting his mouth to that sweet pussy. He would push his stiff tongue inside her beautiful body and tease her until she screamed his name. His hands were already pushing her skirt up on her thighs, pulling her damp panties down and off. He buried his face against her, deeply inhaling her delicious fragrance.

Her gasp became a groan as his agile tongue swiped along her slit, swirling around the swollen rosy button at the top. He plunged his tongue inside her, stabbing deep again and again. Sara's head tossed against the sofa. She seemed lost and burning in the pleasure he provided, and when he pushed two long fingers into her and his suckling mouth fastened around her aching clit, she exploded, bucking and wetting his chin with her cream.

Dash kept his fingers moving gently in and out of her body, to keep her aroused, to keep her hot. He licked his lips, savoring the sweet musk of her as he unzipped his pants and pulled out his thick cock. He couldn't resist squeezing once and a drop of pre-cum oozed down the wide, flared head.

He fitted himself to her slick opening and pushed hard, stretching her wide, penetrating in short digs until he was seated deeply within her hot channel. She moaned once and was still. Her eyes were open, dark and dazed with pleasure, locked on his, and his control broke.

He slammed forward, hammering into her soft pussy, groaning with every inward thrust. He was doing her so hard her small breasts were bouncing, and a distant part of his brain recognized that it was too much too soon, but he couldn't seem to stop himself.

His reaction to her had been intense and almost ungovernable from the first moment when she walked into his office to interview with Carolyn for the job. His body had responded urgently and immediately to her presence, and four months of that daily torture had made him hotter than he could remember being in his life.

Dash adjusted his angle suddenly, making Sara cry out at the flash of pure fire that now accompanied every thrust. Her body arched up rhythmically into his. Little gasping cries escaped her throat.

He pushed down fiercely, and his release shot out of him. It boiled up from his balls like a volcano, thick and scalding hot. He pumped into her over and over, filling her up with his cum.

He heard her shriek as her teeth scraped his shoulder and was fiercely glad she was with him. He hung over her, panting.

Sara went limp beneath him, and his unruly cock jumped inside her, still hard. After so many months of waiting, no way was this going to be over so quickly. He pulled his cock out of her hot core, his eyes riveted as a flood of cum followed his exit, trailing down toward her anus. Christ, everything about this woman turned him on so hard.

Sara whimpered as he pulled away, felt their combined juices sliding out of her body. She felt dazed, aroused. Hardly able to comprehend what had happened. She began to giggle as a thought struck. Sara James had orgasmed with a man in the room.

Dash looked on worriedly as Sara laughed harder. He drew her into his arms, rubbing soothing circles on her back. "Baby, are you hysterical? Because it's not always like that."

"Like what?" she asked, stifling another giggle.

"It's not always so fast, so hard. I can be slow, baby, so slow you won't remember a time when I wasn't inside you, the rise to pleasure so gentle, you'll beg for it before you get it." His voice was rich and

deeply seductive. “I don’t want you to get the idea that sex is always going to be rushed between us.” He seemed to be determined they would be having more of these intimate encounters together.

Sara rubbed her nose in his chest hair, inhaling his male scent. “If it always was fast with you, I’d be okay with that,” she said simply, feeling the instant tension invading his muscles at her comment. “It wasn’t awful before but I’ve never—that is, I don’t—he always said it was my fault that I didn’t feel...”

“Baby,” Dash interrupted, understanding where this was heading, “he was an ass. There’s nothing wrong with you, except you’re so damn sexy you fry my brain to a crisp and make my dick explode. Even when I’ve just had you, I’m hard as stone and dying to get inside you again. I know I took you a little rough, baby, but I’ll be so gentle next time.” Dash brushed his lips over her cheek, nuzzling against her ear and feeling her tremble.

Sara whispered something, her face buried in his chest.

“What was that, honey girl? I didn’t hear you.”

She spoke again, but her mouth was pressed against his throat and the words were indistinct.

“Baby, you can keep doing that as long as you want, but I still can’t hear you,” Dash said, rubbing his big hands up and down her back, smoothing her soft body against him. He flexed his fingers into her rounded hips, pulling her closer.

* * * *

“You didn’t kiss my breasts,” Sara repeated absently, licking his chest, tasting his sweat. Images of his carnal mouth on her breasts had kept her awake more than one night in the past four months, wondering if it could possibly feel as good as her midnight dreams insisted it would. His cock pushed insistently against her thigh, and all she could think of was how close he was to her hungry core.

“That was an oversight for sure,” Dash agreed immediately. He

shifted Sara suddenly so that she was straddling his body, his fully engorged cock pushing aggressively against her soft, wet heat. His mouth fastened onto her nipple and he sucked hard as he pressed firmly up into her creamy body. Their moisture eased his way, but it was still a snug fit.

Sara writhed around his hardness, panting and clutching his damp shoulders. His big body stretched her swollen sensitive folds as he pushed in to the hilt. It was almost unbearable, too much sensation, too hot, too tight, too perfect.

“Oh, Dash, oh, God.” She gasped when he licked her stiff red nipples. Back and forth, from one to the other, all the time his cock was moving slowly in her, rubbing the big head against her womb. She could feel him so deep, so hard inside her, it was impossible to keep a thought in her head. He penetrated her, surrounded her, consumed her, and she had never felt so possessed or so free in her life.

Gasping, crying, she begged him for pleasure, and he gave her everything. He worked his big cock, pistoning inside her hot sheath, making her so excited her juices seeped down to wet his balls.

* * * *

Dash was going crazy from the taste and feel of her in his arms at last. Their headlong rush into the flames was making him lose his reason.

They were moving together, faster and faster, until finally he was pounding up into her and she was slamming down to meet his powerful thrusts. Grinding her clit against his pubic hair, she came in a screaming rush.

Dash roared out his release and flooded her with his hot seed. He came and came until he almost lost consciousness with the force of his pleasure. Damn, what this woman could do to him.

Long moments later, when he had recovered enough to breathe

without gasping, Dash gently disengaged their bodies and eased Sara down to the leather sofa. She was breathing slowly and looked to be asleep.

He was amused to see that her skirt was up around her waist and her top was pulled down only enough to free her lovely breasts. She still had one strappy shoe on, so he removed that for her. His own pants were still around his knees. He shook his head, knowing that his reputation as a lover was suffering today. But something about Sara destroyed his control and made him as desperate as a teenager after his four months of unaccustomed abstinence.

The only thing that made his loss of control bearable was that Sara had enjoyed his body, too. The thought of her sweet face tortured with pleasure, her soft voice begging for his cock, was a memory he would cherish until he was old and feeble. He snorted out a laugh. With Sara around, he would probably still have a hard-on then, even when he was too damned old to do anything but think about it.

He zipped his pants, then fetched a damp towel from his private bathroom and wiped the sticky evidence of their pleasure off Sara's thighs and the leather. He smiled at her sleepy grumbles as he gently cleaned her and frowned at the circles under her eyes. He cursed as he imagined her terror at finding a dead thing in her bed.

Then he tenderly righted her clothing and covered her with his jacket, leaving her to doze in his office while he went out to conference with Isaac and Grange about her bastard of an ex. That son of a bitch was due for a taste of his own medicine, with three ex-Army Rangers shoving the spoon down his throat.

Chapter 3

Sara moaned as she came awake, wondering at the stiffness in her body. As she sat up, a big Armani jacket slid off her to the floor, and the events of the morning came flooding back.

Oh, God. She had done the unthinkable and slept with her boss—twice. Frantically consulting her watch, she moaned again. A nooner, that's what it was called. She had to escape before he came back. She could never look into those piercing blue eyes again without thinking of his talented tongue pushing into her, making her cry out in climax. How could she even do a team consult in his office? She would be looking at this leather couch and remembering, and there wouldn't be a single word recorded on her planning sheets.

Hurriedly cleaning up in Dash's washroom, she tried to be objective. Looking in the mirror, she finally gave up. Yes, her hair looked like a man's hands or a freak tornado had rearranged it. And her eyes were, well, stunned. Her co-workers would take one look and know exactly what she had been doing in Dash's office. It was a disaster.

She had almost decided to climb out the window to avoid seeing him when Dash opened the door. He quickly shut it behind him and crossed to Sara, pulling her against his broad chest and dropping his head to her hair.

"Sweet Sara," Dash said as he gathered her close.

Sara found herself wrapped in his arms, leaning against his broad chest and soaking in the animal heat of him. As he rubbed big, slow circles on her back, she gradually relaxed and her momentary panic subsided. She slid her arms around his waist and they stood quietly

for a moment, rocking slightly, just holding each other, enjoying the shared warmth.

“I wanted to get back before you woke up, but I guess I didn’t quite make it,” Dash said softly, his mouth at her ear. “I don’t want you to think that I would just get up and leave as soon as the fireworks were over. I wouldn’t do that to you, Sara. I wanted to be here to see your beautiful eyes open. I wanted my face to be the first thing you saw.”

He inhaled deeply, burying his nose in her hair.

“I want my face to always be the first thing you see.” His words were blunt, unguarded, and he punctuated them with tiny kisses all along her hairline. “I rushed to get back here so that I could have you in my arms as quickly as possible. I resented each individual minute I was away.”

Sara shrugged, uncomfortable with the tenderness in his voice and how much she wanted it to be real. How much she wanted it to be for her alone.

She pulled back a little. “It was only about an hour, I think,” she said, trying to sound calm when there were shivers chasing up and down her spine from the gentle brush of his mouth.

“God, baby, even an hour is too long to be away from you. Are you feeling okay? Do you need anything before we go out and talk to Isaac and Grange? We need to get the ball rolling on the investigation into your ex.”

Sara jerked out of his arms. “I don’t want to talk to Isaac and Grange about this.”

“Look, there’s no need to worry about giving them the details. Isaac and Grange have heard it all. They need all the facts so they can help you. So I can concentrate on keeping you safe while they catch the bad guy.” His mouth smiled, but his eyes were watchful.

“I don’t want everyone to know.” Her voice was sharp with humiliation.

“Everyone here knows,” Dash said grimly. “I want every agent on

alert.”

He wanted every agent at DIG on alert because of a dead bird?

“It’s not that serious,” Sara protested faintly.

“It’s not that serious? The situation is out of control. You need help, Sara.” His voice was determined.

“You think I’m weak because I ran. That I need you to take care of me.” She threw it at him like an accusation, but he could hear the ache behind it. As if *she* thought she was weak. As if she thought she should be able to handle an escalating stalker on her own.

“I want to take care of you. I don’t think running means you’re weak, I think it means you’re smart. You got away from a dangerous situation and started over. Sara,” he said, taking another tack, “killing little animals to get your attention is serious stuff. This ex of yours needs the kind of help only prison can provide.” Dash clearly relished the idea of locking Martin up and throwing away the key.

“We don’t even know if it was Martin. Carolyn is only making a guess,” Sara said stubbornly.

Dash sighed and let his hands drop. “Carolyn has some of the best instincts in the business, and if she has one of her hunches about this Martin guy, then it’s good enough for me. At the very least, it gives us a place to start. Isaac and Grange respect her judgment, too.”

“I’m not saying Carolyn’s judgment is bad,” Sara said, appalled that he would think it. “I just—”

“Sara.” Nothing more, just her name in that dark, persuasive voice.

She stopped and wrapped her slender arms around herself. “All right, say it was Martin, there’s no way to prove it. He’s so clever about planning things. He has a master’s degree in strategic thinking,” she said inanely. She rubbed her arms absently, feeling chilled. “I’ll have to move again. I was starting to like San Antonio.”

Dash was at her side instantly. “Forget it,” he snarled. “You’re not leaving San Antonio, Sara. Get that thought out of your head.” He needed her to understand she was safer here than she would be

running again. She was safer with him.

“But I can’t stay at my apartment. He can get in any time he wants.” Just saying the words made her feel panicky. Dash took her small, cold hands and held them in his big, hot ones.

* * * *

“Of course you won’t be staying at your apartment. It’s too dangerous.” He was taking her to his home, but wasn’t certain how to state it without making her balk. This closeness between them was familiar to him because it had occupied his thoughts for months, but it would still be very new for Sara. And she could be frighteningly willful at times. He didn’t want her to fight him on this. Maybe if Carolyn suggested it, she would be more amenable to the idea. He put an arm around her back and led her to the door.

“We’ll go across the hall to the small conference room. Carolyn is there now, and she can help us come up with an action plan.” Dash didn’t have a master’s degree, but courtesy of the United States Government, he and his Ranger team had survived some of the worst hellholes on the planet. He always had a series of interlocking plans in any situation, every one ending with the words “or improvise.” It was a standing joke among his Ranger buddies, but it had saved their asses more than once, so they could laugh all they wanted. Dash didn’t care.

Grange and Isaac stood when Dash and Sara entered the room. Carolyn was on the phone, writing furiously on a legal pad and nodding.

Sara sat where Dash indicated, still looking uneasy about exposing her private problems to her co-workers. She seemed to feel that no one else at DIG Security would find themselves in such a circumstance.

True, Dash thought, his people were trained to respond appropriately in a split second to many different situations. According to Carolyn, Sara had spent weeks planning her great getaway, and it

hadn't succeeded for even a few months. He could see where it might be humiliating for her to have to admit that just when she was starting to feel a part of their team.

Dash pulled up a chair directly beside Sara's, sitting close enough to rest his hand on the back of her chair. He hoped that his warmth and nearness would give her comfort. He was trying so hard to find a way to make this better for her.

It was an awkward beginning, but Isaac conducted the interview very carefully with Carolyn doing most of the talking, filling in the blanks when Sara's voice trailed away. Sara only had to give a few details from her life before the move, since Carolyn's remarkable memory supplied nearly every piece of information from both her employee records and their luncheon conversations.

A picture gradually emerged of a man who was precise and controlling, and it was all Dash could do to sit beside a trembling Sara without pulling his gun and going hunting for a target. He met Isaac's eyes across the table and knew the other man felt the same. In four short months, Sara had become a valued employee and a friend, and they would all understand the pain and fear she had been quietly enduring.

"Where will you stay, Sara?" Grange asked. He could flay the skin off an agent with a few well-placed words, but his voice now was so gentle that tears welled up in Sara's eyes. "You know you can't go home now."

Carolyn opened her mouth to speak, but at a look from Dash, she subsided.

"Sara is staying with me," Dash stated firmly. He watched Sara closely, seeming to expect a protest, but in truth, she was so close to collapsing that she didn't have the energy to spare in fighting him.

She searched his face, seeing determination in the set of his jaw, in his burning stare. His absolute resolve to have her with him was more than obvious to everyone in the room. He was being polite about it, but he did not intend to be denied.

Sighing, saying nothing, Sara let her head fall to rest on Dash's shoulder. His arms came around her immediately, pulling her into his lap and rubbing her back soothingly.

If he was willing to have her stay with him, she was more than happy to accept the offer. She only hoped he was prepared for the consequences, because she didn't think she could keep her hands or her lips off him now that she knew what sex could be like with him. It was wicked and mind-blowing and she could easily become addicted. The man should come with a warning label for unwary females.

Dash took her temporary surrender for what it was and ruthlessly arranged circumstances to his own satisfaction, even going so far as to have Isaac accompany Carolyn to Sara's apartment to pack a bag for her. A woman would know what another woman would need, he reasoned. Then, Isaac could bring the bag back to the ranch house.

Isaac and Grange shared a large house that was on his property as well. So along with his standard security men and the horse trainers, Sara would have the three Rangers on-site and on guard. Whenever Dash couldn't be with her, and those times would be few, he promised himself, someone would be. She would never be alone for that bastard to terrorize her again.

And if he did manage to somehow get by the security at the ranch? Dash mentally shrugged. He wouldn't mind going a few rounds with the man who put such fear in Sara's soft brown eyes. He flexed his hands. He wouldn't mind that at all.

Chapter 4

Sara pushed back her hair and sat up straighter in the passenger seat of the big jeep. She was quickly losing any control of her own life. She had tried to insist on working a full day at DIG, but Dash had immediately vetoed that. He cleared his own schedule for the day and took her to a lovely Italian restaurant for a late lunch. The food was good and plentiful, and Sara ate under his watchful eye.

She tried to skip dessert, but Dash again overruled her, stating that he learned in the Army the body recovered from a shock faster with regular meals and regular sleep. So, thick slices of chocolate cake followed the tortellini. Sara had to admit, she was feeling somewhat revived, even after her ordeal the night before. The Army really knew its stuff, Sara thought.

Dash had taken over, made all the decisions, defined problems and created solutions. He was firm, implacable even, but not aggressive. She could see why he was so good at his job because no detail escaped his notice.

Sara was a little alarmed with herself that she was not trying harder to assert her independence. Surely a thoroughly modern woman who had run halfway across the country to get away from a controlling man should balk at having her life overtaken by another one, but even she could see there was a difference between the two men.

In the past months, Dash had often asked her opinion about business matters, politics, and every subject under the sun, and seemed to love it when she infrequently disagreed with him. He teased and reassured her, encouraged her to try new job capabilities,

and never downplayed her talents.

Today she had discovered that he gave himself freely for her pleasure, and was deeply concerned for her emotional wellbeing.

But when it came to security, he knew his business and he didn't back down. He just steamrolled over any and all protests to do what he knew was right. She was free to argue all she wanted, but it was made perfectly clear that she would be following his instructions to the letter, anyway. He was knowledgeable and persistent, almost arrogant in his certainty that his way was the best way.

He was infuriating, Sara thought, but she didn't fear him. She could see that his instincts were good, his plans thoughtful and sound. He was closely observing her, she knew, waiting for the inevitable protests against his high-handedness, but she didn't feel like protesting at the moment.

It was a novelty for her to spend so much time with a man and feel nothing but pleasure in his company. She wanted to explore these delicious new feelings with the man causing them. She didn't know where it could lead, but she was going to find out.

* * * *

Dash glanced over at Sara periodically as he drove. He didn't speak, trying to give her some space if she needed it, and it seemed she did. They had been on the road for half an hour with nary a word out of his reluctant passenger. A few gentle sighs kept his cock interested, but there was no conversation.

He almost snorted at his own thoughts. It had to be the first time in Dash's history that he had wanted a woman to talk more.

But Sara was a mystery to him. How a woman with her gentle nature had managed to escape and elude a stalker for months, uprooting her whole life and recreating it in another state, was a question he continued to ask himself. It showed a strength she didn't seem to realize she had.

She was damned smart, he knew, and it had saved her so far, but she would not be able to keep running for the rest of her life. The idea enraged him. He was going to make certain the man tormenting her was caught and put away so Sara could choose to live the life she wanted.

He wanted her to choose a life with him.

"We must be getting close to your ranch," Sara said, turning slightly to face him.

"We're on the ranch. That last turn marked the boundary," Dash said. Was that pride in his voice? "This is my property, mine and my partners'."

Sara shifted in her seat, twisting so she could look behind them. "Already? How big is it?"

"It's big. Big enough for three men who need a lot of space."

"Isaac and Grange?"

"Yeah, we own the ranch and the business jointly. Since the days in the Rangers, we've developed a close bond. If I had to choose brothers, Isaac and Grange would be my brothers."

Sara was suddenly still, and Dash could almost hear her mind racing. The rumors. Of course she would have heard stories of their wild escapades. And he couldn't deny them, since most of the stories were true. Hell, the rumors weren't a patch on what they'd actually gotten up to. They had always been adventurous, highly sexual, and they had openly shared their women. The men didn't brag about it, but some of the women did. It wasn't a secret.

In recent months, Dash had been pulling away from the sharing, but he knew Isaac and Grange were still partners in that way as well. They probably always would be. Although they had been slowing down some lately, as well. Maybe they were all reaching an age where they would settle down a bit, stop raising hell and start raising kids.

He glanced over at Sara and his cock hardened, pushing aggressively against his zipper. He could do kids with Sara. He really

could. Just the barest thought, and he was straining and sweating like a stallion, wanting to drag her into his home and keep her beneath him until the first of those mythical children was created. But first, he had to reassure her of her place in his life.

* * * *

“We shared women,” he said. “I know you’ve heard it, and it’s true.” His voice was dark, slow, and seductive in the intimate space of the vehicle. “Sara, you need to know that I won’t share you. You’re not part of that. I wouldn’t ask you to be part of that.”

She had thought about it, worried about it, kept her distance in part because of it. But now, she only felt a perverse sense of disappointment.

“Is it because you think I’m not sexy like the women you shared? I know Nina at the office was one of them. She talks about you three all the time. Carolyn tries to get her to stop, but she...talks.” Sara tried to make her voice even, but she knew it came out achy and needy. “You don’t have to answer that,” she tacked on hurriedly. Suddenly, she wanted the conversation over before this gorgeous man began to list her shortcomings, or worse, was kind to her about them.

Dash whipped the truck around a stand of trees, pulled up to the house and cut the engine. He released her seat belt with a snap and she was dragged into his arms. His hot mouth silenced her cry of surprise, tongue pressing in, stabbing and retreating, making her melt. One hand fisted in her long hair and the other gripped and kneaded her buttocks sensually, causing her panties to flood. She groaned aloud into his mouth, swept into the whirlwind of sensation he created.

Dash was devouring her as if he couldn’t get enough, would never get enough, and she loved it.

* * * *

“Sara, God, baby, if you were any sexier, I’d come just looking at you.” He groaned, kissing down her throat, nuzzling under her ear. He tried to slow them down, made an effort to still his roving hands. He wanted her to feel how special she was, to feel cherished in his arms, but if he didn’t quit now, he’d have his dick inside her in thirty seconds flat. She drove him that high, that fast. And it was the same for her. He could feel it, could sense the rise of passion in her, and it made him wild.

He wrapped his arms around her and tucked her head into his neck. Stroked her hair. Tried to remember the security men watching the house and forget his aching erection.

“You’ve already had more of me than Nina ever did. She chased us, baby, and caught a one-night run. She wasn’t an employee of ours at that time, either. I’ve never considered a replay, and neither have the guys.”

Sara was rubbing her face against him, scenting his skin. She had a tiny smile on her face and her utterly natural sensuality was driving him mad.

“Sara, honey, you’ve got to stop doing that. I’ll do you in the front seat, baby, if that’s what you want. But I really don’t want any of the security men seeing you. They’re all over the place here. I think Grange called in half our guys from other assignments to augment the system we already have in place.”

Sara gulped, raising her head and pushing at him frantically. “Let me up, you crazy man. I don’t want anyone watching, either.” She straightened her skirt and top, popped back into her own seat. With her hand on the door, she turned back to fix him with a cool stare. “And don’t think you can snow me. I know that if Grange populated the ranch with extra security, it was because you ordered it, you—you closet dictator.”

Dash barked out a laugh.

“I’m a *real* dictator, honey. I never tried to hide that. I’ll keep you

safe, Sara, whatever it takes.”

Something in his tone must have reached her, for she looked back into blazing blue eyes.

“Whatever it takes,” he said again. She paused, searching his eyes. Then she nodded slowly.

He came around to her side of the vehicle and opened the door for her, holding out his hand. When she placed her smaller hand in his larger one, he turned and led her up the steps and into his home.

Chapter 5

“Carolyn must think Sara will just move in for good,” Isaac complained, heaving the second large suitcase into the kitchen of Dash’s house. Dropping it to the floor with a thud, he looked around the darkened kitchen. “Where is Sara?”

“She’s having a bath.” After a quick meal of soup and sandwiches, she had immediately gone upstairs to the tub. “Apparently, she loves bubble baths and hasn’t felt safe having one at her apartment lately.” Dash almost put his fist through the wall at the thought of Sara giving up so many pleasures, great and small, just to survive.

“Man, I can’t wait to hear the reason why a bachelor has bubble bath in the house.” Isaac was grinning.

Dash threw his friend a dirty look. “You’ve seen that huge shoulder bag Sara has. She says she carries ‘the essentials’ with her at all times, in case she has to run again. She’s been terrified.”

Isaac sobered. “Yeah, terrified, but smart. She’s still thinking, planning. She’s still alive.”

Both men had seen too many women in their careers who had ignored the warning signs, made excuses for men, stayed too long in abusive relationships. The women who survived were often deeply scarred, but far too many didn’t survive. The stats were shocking. For men who cherished women, enjoyed their company, their soft bodies and complex minds, men like Dash and his partners, the reality was something they fought to change every day. One woman at a time.

Isaac helped himself to a beer from the fridge. “Dash, man, you need to know when we went into Sara’s place, that tiny bird was still on the bed. Its head was twisted half off. It’s fucking sick. We bagged

it for evidence, called David down at the Sheriff's office, and he did up a report." He took a deep drink from the bottle. "Carolyn was feeling it, Dash. She's strong, but—"

"But she's a woman and Sara is her friend."

"Yeah. This son of a bitch knows how to get to a woman, how to torture her. He's dangerous. I'm not sure Carolyn should be involved."

Dash snorted. "You gonna be the one to tell her she can't be involved?"

"Shit."

"Anyway, she suggested a decoy at Sara's, someone turning lights on and off, just being there. Along with surveillance outside. And making sure they drive to the office every morning. Visible, not accessible, until we can lay a trap."

"That needs a woman willing to decoy for a psycho, Dash. Not so many of those, even in security work."

"Carolyn volunteered."

"No." Isaac slammed his beer on the table. "Hell, no."

Dash held out both hands. "Relax. I have a different plan. The decoy wouldn't work, anyway. Carolyn's so much taller. And Sara walks differently." He smiled and glanced involuntarily toward the stairs. "I want her, Isaac."

Isaac laughed. "Yeah, I got that. But she works for us. That could make things really awkward when it's over between you." He sounded genuinely concerned, but his voice had an edge.

"It will never be over," he answered simply. "I'm keeping her."

"She's already got a stalker, man," Isaac said pointedly. "That job has been filled."

Unexpectedly, Dash laughed. "That did sound bad, didn't it? Her choice, Isaac. If she wants to leave, once she's safe, she can leave." He looked at his friend and brother in arms. "If she decides to stay, it'll be permanent."

Isaac watched him. "Does she know it?"

“She will,” he answered complacently.

Isaac just shook his head, laughed, and waved his way out the door.

Dash took the stairs two at a time, eager to get to Sara. Damn, just thinking of her in a tub full of slowly disappearing bubbles was keeping him on the edge of arousal. Isaac, the bastard, had seen it, and his knowing smirk had been almost too much to take.

Pausing at the bathroom door, he listened carefully. Nothing. He pushed the door open slowly, wondering if Sara had fallen asleep in the warm water. He would have a hard time getting her out of the tub without waking her if that was the case.

* * * *

Sara stood on the mat, clutching a fluffy towel to her chest. “You could knock,” she said crisply.

“I didn’t want to wake you if you had dozed off.”

His consideration took the fire out of her complaint. “I was falling asleep. That’s why I got out,” she admitted. “I didn’t want to drown myself by accident.”

Dash smiled. He stepped forward and took the towel from her, ignoring her gasp and her protesting hands, and proceeded to dry her skin as tenderly as a mother with her baby. Sara was relaxed and sleepy from the heat of the water, and she subsided and let him do it. She was starved for this man’s touch.

He seemed absorbed in his task, running the soft terrycloth over her, causing the delicate scent of peaches that clung to her skin to rise in the air. He kissed her shoulder as he wrapped the towel around her and secured it. It was large, sized for his big body, and he had to pull it around her twice. He nuzzled her neck, her ear, her cheek. He buried his nose in her damp hair.

At first Sara stood docilely and accepted his attention. But soon, his gentleness wasn’t enough. Her body was beginning to wake to his

caresses, humming with want. She pushed her fingers into his thick black hair, trying to steer his roving mouth toward her lips. She needed his kiss, needed the burning pleasure of his taste.

“Please,” she whispered. “Dash, please.” Her breath was coming faster, but she still couldn’t coax him to give her that flaming passion she had experienced with him earlier. She had sensed it in him from the beginning. The fire in him called to something in her, something free and wild that only he could touch, and she wanted it again.

“Please what, Sara? What do you need?” His voice was low, muffled. His words indistinct.

“Please.” She could hardly speak through her gathering desperation. She could feel her body dampening, clenching. “Please, kiss me.”

“I am kissing you.” His mouth was against her breast. “I’m kissing you all over.”

Sara’s body flushed wildly at his words, and he caught her against him as her knees buckled. His delighted laughter rumbled in his chest and the deep sound of it only pushed her higher. He moved with her in his arms, pressing kisses into his skin wherever she could reach.

When he lowered her to the bed and tugged her towel off, she kept her hold on his hair, pulling him down on top of her. Her sigh of pleasure at the feel of his weight on her almost finished him right there.

“Damn, Sara, I’m trying to go slow here.” Dash pulled away slightly, whipped his shirt off over his head and flung it away. His hands and lips returned to her body immediately, stroking over her pale, gleaming skin, suspending her in a world of sensation, making her dance sensually against his black satin sheets.

* * * *

He could feel every beat of his heart in the throbbing of his hard cock. Sara was so open to pleasure she was driving his arousal higher

and higher. Everything he thought he knew about himself, every limit he had, was destroyed by her natural sensuality. There was no limit to how high sweet Sara could take him. He didn't think she was even aware she was still whispering the word please with every breath, begging for his mouth, his hands, his cock. And he was happy to share his body for her pleasure.

She moaned into his mouth when he finally kissed her, and the soft sound reverberated in his head. He freed his aching cock, pushing one big finger inside her to test her readiness to receive him. She was very wet. Her softness rippled around him, clutching and tugging at his probing finger, and thoroughly destroying his good intentions.

He had just enough restraint to enter her slowly, pushing the wide head of his penis steadily further and controlling her wild motions with his hard hands. She was whimpering now, completely lost in the moment, and he was enthralled by her uncivil beauty. He thrust in to the hilt, holding himself there in full extension, feeling her hot sex stretching to accommodate his deep penetration. The rush of wetness that accompanied her frenzied cry blasted through his resolve and he lunged repeatedly, driving them both to the jagged edge of their endurance.

When he leaned down and nipped her throat, Sara bucked and wailed her release.

With a final deep thrust, his hot semen burst from him in hard spurts, setting off a second intense orgasm for her. He collapsed on top of her, completely drained.

After a long moment, he anchored her hips and rolled to his back, keeping his softening cock inside her. She murmured and snuggled her face into his throat, going boneless in seconds. And just like that, they slept.

Twice in the night, Sara came awake to the feel of him moving inside her, riding her gently into a dreamy series of soft orgasms. She didn't even open her eyes, content to let him do as he would. She drifted back to sleep immediately after, and his hard arms held her

gently through the dark hours until dawn.

Chapter 6

When Sara finally woke, the bedroom was bright with sunshine. Feeling dazed, she looked around for a clock, but there wasn't one in sight. She wasn't even sure what day it was, actually. The only thing she knew for certain was she hadn't felt so good in her entire life. Her body was tender in places and her thighs were sticky, and she had been thoroughly enjoyed by a strong, virile man.

It felt wonderful.

She stretched in the bed, smiling slightly and remembering Dash and his magnificent body driving her into a frenzy of lust, over and over again. Truly the best night of her life.

That was how Dash found her when he arrived with her breakfast tray and the soft, smug look on her face made his well-used cock throb.

He had put that expression on her face, and looking at her he had a sudden memory of that famous painting called *Mona Lisa*. It was that same feminine knowing, that understanding of beauty and passion in her smile that had cast a spell on viewers for hundreds of years. It was captivating, and it drew him as a man so powerfully, he was at her side before he realized it.

Sara opened her eyes to see Dash watching her. She felt a new rush of heat and moisture as she took in his appearance, broad, tanned chest bare, muscles rippling as he moved, blue jeans zipped but not buttoned. She wriggled seductively, loving his eyes on her.

Dash cleared his throat and dragged his wandering attention back to the tray in his hands. "I brought breakfast," he said. "Coffee with real cream, omelet, toast, and sliced melon. I'm sorry I didn't have

any strawberry jam. I know you love it, so I added it to the grocery order. Grange will pick it up today.”

Sara sat up. “You sent Grange shopping?” The image was incongruous, like walking a panther down Main Street. The idea of that cool, dangerous man in the grocery store pushing a cart and choosing from brands of jam tickled her, and she giggled.

The happy little sound made Dash’s heart stutter in his chest. He wanted to hear it every day for the rest of his life. Sara’s happiness was so beautiful to him.

“Well, I have to stay here and keep you satisfied,” he teased, “so someone else has to do the shopping.”

She tilted her head to one side and considered him with a smile. “Yes,” she said. “You do.”

While he gaped and struggled to breathe against the hot rush of blood to his groin, she calmly took the tray and settled it over her lap. “Thank you for the lovely breakfast.” She took a bite of the omelet and moaned. Heavenly.

Dash collapsed on the bed beside her and pretended to clutch his chest. “I had always heard that beautiful women can be cruel, but I never believed it until now. Woman, you just gave me heart failure. I may never fully recover.”

She giggled around a mouthful of toast. His teasing was so precious to her. He treated her like a friend, like a lover, and she was soaking it up. She held out her toast and he took a growling, playful bite, lazing comfortably on the bed and talking with her while she ate breakfast.

Sara stole glances at him as she chewed, marveling at the changes that had taken place in her life. After the experiences of the day before, she could hardly believe she had held him off for four months. If she had known how incredible the sex with him would be, how powerful the need he could create, she could never have stayed away so long. Many times she had felt his bewilderment at her avoidance, and now, she was almost as surprised herself.

His blue eyes, intense and watchful, his devil-black hair, and the strong, muscular body that fascinated her all seemed designed specifically to please. His innate intelligence, his caring, and his drive to protect those smaller and weaker than himself made him a man without equal in Sara's eyes.

"You're my dream," she said softly.

Dash sat up slowly and looked at her questioningly.

"I've been alone, always on the outside. My parents were so much older, and they both died when I was in college. And then Martin, one of my course advisors, took an interest, helped me through the funeral planning, and made me finish my class work when I really didn't care. Even through my relationship with him, I still felt cold inside." She stopped, trying to find the words to make him understand what he offered to her. "You are like a dream for me. When I'm with you, I'm normal. I don't feel cold."

Dash took the empty tray from her and set it beside the bed. He wrapped her up in his arms and leaned back against the pillows, letting her talk.

"I don't mean to put some kind of pressure on you," she said seriously. "I just need you to know what you've given me. And," she paused, unsure of how to continue, "no matter how long these affairs usually last, I want this feeling. I want to be with you."

* * * *

"Do you see me going anywhere?" Dash was torn between fierce joy and exasperation. The mind of a woman was a fascinating thing to him. He had done everything but tattoo her name on his chest to show his intense need for her, and if he understood this conversation, she was giving him permission to leave her in a few weeks or maybe months. However long she thought his *usual* affairs lasted.

The poor thing still had no real idea of what he had in mind.

He smiled. "Sara, I want you," he began.

“I want you, too, more every time.” She twisted in his arms to face him, sliding her lips along his neck and his chest. She nuzzled and nipped along his collarbone, and he groaned.

“Sara,” he tried again, “let’s talk about this, about us.” Damn, he sure as hell had never said that before. “Slow up, woman, I can’t think when you’re doing that.” What she was doing was rubbing her nose along his taut belly, following the line of hair down to where his erection strained against the denim.

He tried to pull her up, but she grabbed his hands and held tight. The top of his head nearly blew off when she put her lovely face down right on his cock and took the zipper in her white teeth.

She pulled it down slowly, so slowly.

Dash was panting, every muscle in his body rock hard, when she let go of his hands and reached to pull out his hard penis. A pearly drop glistened on the broad head, and her pink tongue licked out delicately to gather it in. Sweat broke out on his forehead as his cock flexed.

* * * *

Sara moaned as the wild taste of him hit her tongue. The heat of his male flesh in her mouth was provocative.

She had never done this before, this act that men seemed to crave. But she could quickly come to crave it, too. His musky male scent, his taste, the way his big body shook as she opened her lips over him. She moaned aloud.

Delicious.

She held the large, plum-shaped head in her hot mouth until he shuddered then moved to take more. A few slow strokes up and down and she was getting the rhythm, sinking over him to take his cock deeper and sucking as she pulled away. His hips were following her hypnotic motions, gently at first and then with more strength, more force, until he was cupping the back of her head in one hand and

shoving his penis through her pursed lips.

Sara's eyes were heavy, the blatantly sexual act arousing her, also. Her gaze met his and she tightened her mouth around him and reached to cradle his balls in one cool hand.

He shouted as he came. His powerful neck corded, and pulse after pulse of hot semen splashed against the back of her throat. She moaned and suckled him, drinking him down. She took all he had to give until his head rocked back to thud against the wall and still he came.

His muscles went limp suddenly. Sara held him inside her mouth for a long moment, and then gradually let him slip free.

She still felt aroused herself, but a curious satisfaction slid through her, curling around her heart and burning away the last of the coldness. She moved up beside Dash and laid her head on his hot shoulder. His arm came around her weakly to draw her closer.

"Damn, Sara," he whispered, his breathing still labored. "That was the hottest thing."

"I read about that," she said shyly.

Dash groaned and laughed. "Your first time? God. You're a natural, sweet Sara."

His cock twitched, its hot length still semi-hard against her thigh. She squirmed a little, still aroused, still needing. Not knowing how to ask him.

But he recognized her involuntary movements, smelled the spicy scent of her aroused pussy infusing the air around them. The room smelled like sex, and he loved it.

"Now it's your turn." His voice rasped along her nerve endings, making her shiver in feminine appreciation. "Lie back and put your arms over your head. Keep them there, Sara." His voice was warm and dark, but it was clearly an order.

Shivering, Sara complied, arching her back as her arms lifted, loving the feel of his burning gaze as it rested on her breasts. Her nipples were hard little points against the creamy mounds, and as

Dash lowered his dark head, his tongue coming out to tease the very tip, Sara sighed and melted into the pillows. Her soft body twisted involuntarily, trying to coax him into a deeper intimacy.

The pleasure she loved was just out of reach, and she began to beg him softly, wildly for what she so desperately needed.

When Dash finally drew her nipple into his hot mouth and suckled, Sara jerked in his arms, crying out at the tiny climax. Her broken cries seemed to inflame him, and he pulled harder at her breast, hollowing his cheeks and tugging rhythmically at her other breast with his fingers. Her body convulsed, and he groaned deep in his throat.

He shifted above her, pushing down to run his tongue over her drenched slit, tasting the heat and spice of her release. He shoved his stiffened tongue inside her, drinking her essence as her cries escalated. He was everywhere, covering her, surrounding her. His fingers continued to tug on her nipples, his lips plucking at her clit. He nipped her tender, sensitive flesh with his teeth. Breathless, mindless, Sara didn't know she was begging incoherently and writhing against the black satin.

He heaved himself up suddenly, sliding smoothly into position and thrusting heavily into her wet heat. His powerful movements forced tiny, rhythmic screams from her, pushing her higher and higher until she was riding one long, endless climax, and still he thrust.

Following some ancient instinct, she reached down between their bodies and brushed her cool fingertips against his tight balls.

Roaring, his whole body went rigid and she felt the strong blasts of his release as he poured his scalding seed inside her, setting off another long wave of blazing ecstasy for her. Their eyes locked and the intensity of the moment sent tears running down her face. He leaned in, sipping at them tenderly.

Lowering his head to taste her throat, he buried his sweaty face in her tangled hair. "God," he muttered.

Sara giggled, still gasping for air. Dash was a heavy weight above

her, pressing her into the mattress, but she didn't mind not being able to breathe. The man was dangerously talented.

"Lethal," she said softly. But she was smiling as she drifted off to sleep, secure in his strong arms.

* * * *

"We've had people watching her house, her entire neighborhood all weekend," said Isaac. "Nothing. We've got every agent we can spare working this case and we know everything about Martin Brent, right down to his shoe size and the name of his therapist. We don't know where he is yet, but we'll find him."

Dash turned away from the window where he was watching Sara and Carolyn set out food for the Sunday night barbecue that had become the custom on the ranch in summer. They were laughing like girls, faces flushed and eyes shining. Sharing some wicked secret, probably, he imagined. That Sara could still blush after their weekend descent into debauchery was charming to him. He felt a deep need to protect that beautiful innocence in her, and wanted just as strongly to devour it. She was turning him inside out.

"We know where the hell he is," Dash said grimly. "He's here, close enough to terrorize Sara, to see the results of his handiwork."

"Well, he hasn't surfaced yet, but he will. He wants her to be scared enough to jump back into his arms, so he needs to be reachable. Don't growl at me. I'm trying to state facts." Isaac held his hands up in surrender.

Dash checked himself. Damn it, he had been snarling softly at his friend. He raked impatient hands through his hair. "Christ, I'm a mess."

"You're nuts about her," Grange said calmly from the doorway.

"He's nuts, period. He always has been." Isaac grinned.

Dash grimaced. "Don't you two jokers have a job to do? Could we concentrate on finding this asshole bothering Sara, and then you can

laugh at me all through the wedding.”

Grange straightened. “You asked her already?” His tone was disbelieving.

“No, I haven’t asked.”

“He doesn’t ask. He gives commands. He probably just ordered her to show up at a certain church at a certain time wearing a white dress and carrying flowers.” Isaac was still grinning, needling his friend.

Seeing that Dash was about to explode, Grange stepped forward. “I have a report on Martin Brent,” he stated, effectively distracting his friends and preventing an outright brawl in the living room. He didn’t mind them fighting, had happily joined them on occasion in bars and barracks, but he preferred that his friends didn’t fight each other.

“Martin Brent’s credit card secured a room for a Brent Martin at Hollywell’s Hotel in San Antonio, booked a week ago and registered for another two weeks. He’s a college guidance counselor, so he needs to finish this business with Sara before September, or give up his job. He’s got a month left of summer vacation, so he’s escalating right on schedule for that.”

One of the things that Sara had stressed about Martin Brent was his obsessive time-awareness and his down-to-the-minute planning.

“Did you see him?” Dash was a bottom-line man, always.

“No, looks like he hasn’t been there for a couple of days, but his stuff is still there. All clothes hung up, pressed and perfect. Sara didn’t say he was a neat freak,” Grange commented. “He had a couple of things that look like they might be hers there as well. Has it all in this little silver box with Sara’s initials on it. Probably the missing stuff from her apartment.”

“He’s a freak, period,” Dash said softly. The other men nodded.

Dash didn’t even ask how Grange had gotten a look inside the hotel room. Locks and alarms weren’t built to keep Grange out. He could finesse his way into any security set-up anywhere on the planet. The only factor was time. Most conventional locks were child’s play

to him. He was through them almost without noticing they had even been there. Dash thought, not for the first time, that he was damn glad Grange had a conscience and a code because the world wasn't ready for a criminal with that kind of eerie talent.

"We have three agents in rotating shifts at the hotel now. We have three agents in Sara's neighborhood." Grange's voice was cool as he detailed the arrangements he had made. Only someone who had walked with him into some dangerous missions and some seedy bars after those missions would hear the slight shift in tone that indicated the level of his anger. He had perfected his control long ago, but he was not the emotionless man he allowed the world to see. He needed that iron control precisely because he felt so deeply. And Sara was rousing all his protective instincts.

Sara even resembled his younger sister a bit, which would hit Grange hard, Dash knew. Grange hadn't seen his sister since he had been kicked out of the house as a teenager, and the only person who meant anything to him in that family was Lissa.

Dash turned to Isaac. "What did the team find at Sara's?"

"Not a damn thing. Not a print of his, nothing but that bird." Isaac seemed at a loss.

Dash frowned. Any normal person should have left some trace, something. "Is it possible he has training? What do we know about his history?"

Isaac spoke up. "We know everything on record, from the time he started school."

"Is there any chance he has sealed criminal records from his youth? Aliases?" Dash was grasping at straws and he knew it.

"I'll get somebody on it," Grange said immediately. "You're right, he seems too good for this to be his first time."

"It's not legal to go snooping for that kind of info," Isaac said facetiously. "Better get the Sheriff to do it for you."

"Ask Carolyn for her take," Dash suggested. "She's good with profiles." Interesting how both Isaac and Grange came to attention

when Carolyn's name was mentioned. Dash thought maybe there was a chance...No, Grange and Isaac weren't known for their patience. They didn't need patience because when they expressed an interest, the women just fell at their feet. If there was enough chemistry there to draw them into an affair, there would have been an affair by now.

"I'll bring Carolyn in when the background is complete. But right now, you'd better get to the grill, Dash, or the steaks won't be cooked in time for the dinner, and the ladies will roast us instead." Grange made his statement and walked out, leaving the other men to follow.

Chapter 7

Monday morning was explosive, simply because Sara insisted on going to work, even after Dash had asked her to take a few days off. She was so adamant that Dash finally gave in and took her in to the office with him, forgoing his morning run to keep her in sight. He also moved her from the central work area into a small, empty office right beside his, banging her last box of files down on the desk with visible ill will.

“The whole office will be gossiping about me now,” Sara protested again. “Only here four months, and she gets her own office? I wonder what, no, who she did to get that?” She knew her imitation of Nina’s cool, malicious voice was accurate when Dash smiled even through his obvious irritation.

“Sara, your work speaks for itself. You would have had this office already on the strength of that, if it hadn’t been too much temptation for one ordinary man to resist.” His blue eyes glinted down at her. “We do have a connecting door now, you’ll notice.”

“I noticed,” she said crisply.

“I noticed, and what’s more to the point, I fantasized about it day and night,” he said through his teeth. “Ever since Carolyn suggested this empty office for you weeks ago.”

Sara felt some of her displeasure fading at the knowledge that her supervisor and friend had already acknowledged her hard work.

“Carolyn thought I should have an office?” It was amazing how much that meant, Sara thought.

“Carolyn was pissed at me when I didn’t agree immediately,” Dash corrected with a sudden grin, “but I could hardly tell her why. It

wouldn't do for the boss to admit that one sexy little blonde could throw me off my stride so easily without even trying. I do have a reputation to maintain." His comic leer diffused the tension between them.

Sara laughed softly, her face glowing at the outrageous compliment. She knew she was plain, knew that other men found her old fashioned and boring, but she was fiercely glad that Dash found something sexy about her. Lord, she certainly thought of sex enough around him. Perhaps his remarkable instincts had picked up on her deep awareness of him as a man. He was compelling to her on so many levels. It was a wonder she had managed to avoid her attraction to him for as long as she had.

She leaned against him and wrapped her arms around his back. She was just leaning up to kiss him when she happened to see movement.

That quickly, she was pushed behind his broad back as he faced down the intruder.

"Well, now, this is interesting," Nina remarked, crossing her arms and leaning elegantly against the open door. Her voice was cool, but her eyes were hot with rage. "Are you getting a new job title to go with your new office, Sara? Something to indicate your new duties, perhaps?" Her tone was frankly insulting.

Sara stiffened at the insinuation, feeling her face flush with shame, but before she could say anything, Dash spoke.

"Close the door on your way out, Nina," he said calmly. He kept his hold on Sara's arm, making sure she stayed behind him and out of Nina's line of sight.

"Dash, you can't be serious about her," Nina said with disdain. She moved closer, putting that extra little swivel in her slender hips. "She can't give you what I gave you that night with your friends. Could she even take three men at once? I know she can't. It's more than obvious she has no experience with men."

"She does now," Sara mumbled from behind him as Dash kept

himself firmly between her and Nina.

“Nina, if you have any doubts about Sara’s qualifications, or her work for this company, talk to Carolyn. Carolyn is her supervisor and it was Carolyn who recommended she be assigned an office. Anything beyond that is none of your business,” he stated. When Nina opened her mouth to speak again, he held up one powerful hand.

“Out.”

“Fine!” Nina stalked to the door, and then turned. “When you’re finished with amateur hour, you know where to find me,” she said waspishly. She pulled the door shut with a snap as she left.

Dash turned to Sara. He blew out a heavy breath. “I’m sorry, Sara. Please don’t let her comments bother you.” He ran his big hands up and down her arms, clearly trying to offer comfort after Nina’s attack.

Sara sniffed. “Well, I guess I’d rather be an amateur than a professional at that, anyway,” she said, tongue-in-cheek.

Dash laughed openly at her unique take on the other woman’s insult. Sara kept confounding him with her honesty and her wonderful, teasing humor. He pulled her close and hugged her until she squeaked out a protest.

“Get to work, woman. And keep that connecting door open at all times so I can hear you if you need help. Don’t argue. I won’t get any work done if I have to worry about that asshole finding you, and I have a lot to do today. In fact, so do you,” he said ruefully, looking around at the numerous boxes taking up nearly every inch of space in the small office. “Once you get going, you’ll forget all about me, anyway.”

Fat chance, Sara thought, but she didn’t say so. She only nodded, and he moved reluctantly into his own office to begin making calls.

She sat down at her new desk and frowned into a box of files. When Dash got bored with her, as a man of his varied experience eventually would, she would have to look for another job, she realized. Being around him day after day, watching him from a distance, would be torture now that she had spent time with him. Now

that she had fallen in love with him, she acknowledged with a pang.

She could never watch him with another woman, an experienced, elegant woman who would match him in the bedroom and out. A woman like Nina, with her flexible body and her rampant hunger for sexual adventure. A man like that, such a beautifully masculine animal, didn't belong with someone plain and timid like Sara. She was afraid of her own shadow, running across half a continent just because an old boyfriend was too persistent. No, a man like Dash would never stay with a woman like her for any length of time. She would have to enjoy him while she could, and find a way to let him go at the end of it—without becoming a stalker herself.

Chapter 8

Isaac whistled through his teeth as Dash related the details of the confrontation that morning with Nina, laughing aloud at Sara's clever comment. Even Grange smiled in appreciation.

Dash just shook his head. All three men had a soft spot for intelligent women, but sweet Sara exceeded his expectations at every turn.

"We'll have to do something about Nina eventually." Grange was simply stating the thoughts of all three. "She's coming into work earlier and earlier trying to catch one of us."

"Or all of us," Isaac added.

Dash nodded in agreement.

"She's not going to let up," Grange continued. "She's making some of the agents uncomfortable with her stories and suggestive comments. I spoke to her about it." Grange never had trouble getting his point across. He didn't sugar-coat anything. What you got was the unvarnished truth, as more than one raw recruit could attest.

Dash grimaced. "Well, it didn't help."

"Sara is an employee as well," Isaac pointed out reluctantly. "Are you sure you know what you're doing here?"

"Nina wasn't an employee of ours at the time," Dash protested, and not for the first time.

Isaac held up his hands. "Man, I know, but all I'm saying—"

"This is different," Grange spoke up, giving Isaac a hard look, "because the woman is different."

It was clearly a familiar argument to them, and Dash found himself wondering at the cause. His friends were glaring at each other,

and Isaac had his fists clenched like he was about to start a brawl.

Dash stood. “Could we get back to the issue of a plan for Sara’s stalker?” he asked. “That’s the real reason we had to meet here.” Here was Grange’s office, with Carolyn in Sara’s office helping to sort out the mess, and another agent sitting at Dash’s desk.

“Yeah, whatever.” Isaac threw himself onto the huge leather sofa along the side wall, propping his booted feet on the arm.

Dash glanced over at Grange who just shrugged. His look said they would work it out themselves without Dash’s help.

“I’d like to set up a modified sting, maybe Sara and another woman working late alone. Well, not alone, really—”

“We’d have to sneak back in after leaving for the day,” Isaac put in. “He’s gotta be watching the office by now, at least doing drive-bys. I would be if I was a crazy-ass stalker.”

“We’ll need to ease back on the surveillance, at least give the appearance of it.” Grange followed the thought. “Maybe have Sara driving in her own car for a couple of days prior. Give the impression that we’re standing down.” Anyone who knew the three men would know they didn’t stand down ever. But a college career counselor wouldn’t think like that. He might be well-used to intimidating young women, but dealing with three hardened soldiers would be far beyond his experience.

Dash was never more grateful for his friends’ instant support. The three men had always been a formidable team, and as their ideas flowed, a simple plan took shape to draw Martin Brent in and rid Sara of her stalker problem.

“Carolyn would be the logical choice to stay after work with Sara,” Dash mused.

Two heads came up instantly.

“You both come to point like hunting dogs as soon as her name is mentioned,” Dash said in exasperation. “What the hell is wrong with Carolyn doing her job? She’s damn good, and her ankle won’t hold her back from accomplishing her mandate, if that’s worrying you.”

Grange and Isaac exchanged a complicated glance.

“She is good at her job,” Isaac allowed.

“We’ll take care of it,” Grange said at the same time.

Dash threw his hands up. “Okay, I’ll let Sara and Carolyn in on the plan. The three of us will sneak back in through the maintenance tunnel. What about a backup team? Any suggestions?”

“We’ve never needed a backup team. Our backups always bitch because we never leave any work for them to do,” Isaac smirked.

“They might get some work this time. I can’t be allowed to get my hands on this bastard. I think of him tormenting Sara and I want to kill him.” Dash was serious. “I don’t want to do it in front of Sara, but I’ll tear him apart if I ever get near him. I want to.” His voice was cold, vicious.

Dash could tell from Grange’s sudden nod that Grange had wondered why Sara wasn’t involved in the meeting since she was the most logical bait for the trap, and had some experience working with the team. Excluding her from the planning process didn’t follow Dash’s normal operating procedure, but he felt his control was compromised and that it might threaten the outcome. His team needed to know that. His unusual behavior would make more sense now to his friend.

“Heard and understood.” With those three words, Grange was assuring him he would be there to help Dash keep control in front of Sara.

“Why not just lure him in and beat the hell out of him to teach him a lesson?” Isaac asked bluntly. “You slay the dragon and rescue the princess. Perfect fairytale. Women love that.”

“I would. I want to.” Dash hesitated. He wasn’t sure how to put into words what his instincts were telling him. “Sara has been sheltered by older parents all her life and then browbeaten by this bastard ex. She thinks she’s shy and scared of everything. But she got away from him. And she argued with me the first week she was here, standing up for what she believed. She’s a lot stronger than she thinks

she is. I want to help her see it.”

Isaac shook his head. “Then you won’t get to rescue her,” he warned jokingly.

“Maybe she’ll rescue me.” The weight of seven years of combat was in the tone of Dash’s voice. It was more serious than he meant it to be, but his friends understood. They had been with him in some of the worst places and the darkest moments of his life.

Sara represented light to him. He needed both her beautiful soul and her generous loving nature more than he had ever realized. He had been strangely drawn to her from her first day at the company, and it was only getting stronger with time.

“She has spirit,” Grange mused. “Let her help to catch him.”

Dash nodded, agreeing with the assessment and the suggestion.

“Okay.” Isaac’s strength wasn’t in planning, but in putting the plans into effect and matching individual agents with the requirements of the mission. “Roberts for backup. Burgess,” Isaac said, thinking aloud.

Grange considered. “Maybe Conn as well? He’s out of the hospital and campaigning to get a case. He could just walk in anytime. He hasn’t been here recently to be seen as a regular employee by our resident psycho.”

“Good.” Dash was pleased. “I’m ready to get this over. Let’s call in Carolyn and Sara and see if they have anything to add to our plan.”

Carolyn immediately volunteered to be the second woman working late, as Dash had known she would. Sara protested until she heard about the backup team, and then she also agreed. The other agents were called in and a date was chosen for the beginning of the operation, Wednesday of that week, giving them two days for setup.

Martin Brent had been spotted cruising his rental car past DIG and Sara’s apartment building, but the agents watching had reported and stayed hidden, letting him get comfortable.

Sara was nervous but determined to do her part. When she first heard the confirmation of Martin’s identity, she had felt scared and

nauseated, but she pulled herself up sternly. These people were putting themselves on the line for her, and she was not going to be the weakest member of this team.

“It’s not just you,” Carolyn said as the other agents began to file out. She was careful to speak quietly to avoid drawing attention. Dash and Grange were still in the room arranging the minutest details of the plan. “We all feel a bit nervous when we start a new operation. It goes with the territory.”

“You sure don’t look nervous,” Sara said feelingly. Carolyn was perfectly put together as always, slender and graceful in her tailored suit.

Carolyn smiled kindly. “If you could see my knees knocking together, you’d know.” She gestured comically and the women laughed together.

Sara impulsively hugged her friend. “Thank you,” she said simply.

“Anytime,” was the quiet reply.

Chapter 9

The next day, Sara marveled as she followed Dash into the new workout room. She stared at the array of equipment, mats, and weapons. And the size. They could train a battalion in this one room.

“If you’re going to be involved in an operation, Sara, you need some idea of self defense, or at least working through your fear,” Dash was saying. “In case he gets too close to you. I’m not expecting that, but I don’t want you to be afraid if it happens.”

“Well, I think that’s unrealistic.” Sara was still looking around, but she felt Dash stiffen beside her. “I mean, I ran because I’m already afraid of him.”

Dash blew out a breath. “Okay.” He toed off his shoes and motioned for her to do the same before stepping onto one of the large mats. “Okay, you ran because you were afraid. We can work with that. The best reaction you could have with an attacker is to get away as fast as possible.” He turned and faced her.

“What did he do to make you afraid, Sara?” Dash tried to keep his fingers from curling into fists at the thought of Sara being frightened by a man. There were too many things a man could do to frighten a woman, and a woman as small as Sara could be injured so easily. So permanently.

Sara fidgeted on the mat. “He shouted when I did things wrong, shouted in my face.”

“In your face.” Dash moved much closer. “Like this?” His voice boomed out in the room, echoing and re-echoing in the large space.

“Yes, like that,” Sara said quickly, waiting for the fear to take hold of her. Then her palms would sweat and she would cringe in front of

him, praying for the screaming to be over, trying not to offend him any further. But it didn't happen.

"It's not the same," she said slowly. "I can't run from you just for that. You need to—to be closer, maybe, to lean over in my face and shout." She couldn't quite believe she was giving a man clear instructions on the best way to intimidate her. And Dash was a large man, certainly much taller and more muscular than Martin. It seemed ridiculous.

Dash loomed over her small frame, using his great size as a silent threat. His expression was fierce and he spoke again. "Sara, did he do this?"

His voice was deep and loud, his posture menacing. But Sara didn't feel the fear that she had become used to when Martin became loud, when he criticized and used her diminutive size against her.

* * * *

Dash was trying to get Sara to show fear, to back up on the mat, but she was looking at him with a clear gaze, totally unfazed by his behavior. She seemed almost puzzled by her own lack of reaction.

Dash was confused himself. Where was the timid woman she described herself as so frequently? He was a large, powerful man. When he was behaving in this way, she should be intimidated, frightened. There were grown men in the United States Army who were afraid of Dash Williams. One small, shy woman shouldn't be so hard to scare.

"Sara, could you tell me what was frightening about him? Can you put that into words? What am I doing wrong? Maybe we could start there."

"You're not doing anything wrong," she said immediately. "You're not out of control. Maybe that's why I don't feel scared. When you lean over me, I don't feel scared, even though you are so much bigger than me." She took a deep breath. "I feel - I want to kiss

you.”

She wanted to kiss him? Sweet Sara thought of his larger size and it made her think of kissing him? A surge of heat went through him, and he almost reached for her.

Dash took a firm grip on his wavering control and stepped back. “Hold that thought,” he said with a wink. “We’ll definitely get back to it. Right now, we need to figure some things out. We need to know what he might do to scare you, so we can practice what you can do to get through the fear feeling.”

“He’ll grab my arms and shake me,” Sara said matter-of-factly. “Then he might shove me away, or—”

Dash turned away, swearing viciously. “Christ, I want to kill him,” he muttered.

“Dash?” Sara’s voice was hesitant.

He spoke carefully. “Did he push you down, Sara? Did he hit you?” He tried to keep his voice even, tried to hide the terrible rage burning through him. He had wanted to find her fear trigger, to use it as an exercise to help her overcome it. He did not want her to learn to be fearful of him, however, so he had to keep this white hot fury at bay. Somehow.

“I didn’t stick around for that part!” Sara gave a sad half laugh. “I know where this leads. I know it’s only a matter of time. I’m not stupid.” She put her arms around his middle from behind and leaned her forehead between his shoulder blades. “I’m not stupid,” she repeated.

Dash turned in her arms and hauled her up against him, burying his face in her fine hair. “No, you’re damn smart, and thank God for it. You got away.”

“Well, I wasn’t really successful at that,” she admitted, her voice muffled against his chest. “He found me here in no time.” Her tone was apologetic, as if she felt that merely escaping an abuser wasn’t quite good enough, when so many women couldn’t even find the strength to get that far.

Dash squeezed her then set her on her feet. "All right, you aren't afraid of me, and I'm grateful, honey. But, we need to find a different angle of approach." He looked around as an idea struck him. "Get your shoes back on. We'll go through the whole office looking for weapons." He grabbed her hand and dragged her along with him.

"There aren't that many weapons lying around the office. The agents are very careful," Sara protested. "I don't know if I could shoot a person, anyway."

Dash laughed out loud and pointed with his free hand. "See that? Picture on the wall, yank it off and brain him with it."

He proceeded to pull her through the whole office, listing everyday objects and ways to beat or maim an attacker with them. Agents throughout the office caught on immediately and called out helpful suggestions as they passed, causing Sara to laugh. By the time they made it to Grange's office on the other side of the building, she was really getting into the game.

Dash skidded to a halt inside the door with Sara right behind him. "What's good in here?" he asked.

"Potted fern," Sara said instantly, grabbing the glazed ceramic pot off its stand and lifting it above her head. "Brain him with it," she quoted.

Grange looked startled, then puzzled as he was threatened with the hapless plant.

"That's my girl," Dash said proudly. "What else?" He took the fern and set it down.

Sara looked around quickly, face flushed, eyes shining. She spotted a likely object.

"Big gold trophy," she stated, grabbing it. "Swing it like a baseball bat and run like hell!"

Dash barked out a laugh as Grange intercepted the mock swing and put his college football trophy gently back on the shelf.

"Burgess?" Grange asked conversationally, recognizing the comment about running like hell. It was Burgess's favorite phrase

when teaching his self defense classes for young women, starting a few years ago when Burgess's own three daughters became teenagers. At one time or another, nearly all of the DIG agents had dressed up in the big padded suit and played bad guy for the college co-eds to beat on under Burgess's watchful eye. Some of those pretty little girls could get vicious, and Walt Burgess was pleased as punch when they did.

"Yes, Mr. Burgess has some wonderful ideas." Sara's voice bubbled with enthusiasm.

"I can just imagine," Grange said repressively.

"Desk lamp, coffee mug, pencil for stabbing," Sara recited happily, moving about the room, eyes roving back and forth, looking for dangerous weapons hiding in plain sight.

"Where is the gentle, delicate young lady we hired a few months ago?" Grange asked, his own eyes beginning to twinkle as he watched Sara.

Dash crossed his arms over his wide chest. "I'm replacing her with this bloodthirsty, modern-day warrior in a skirt," he said with visible satisfaction. "I decided I need a bodyguard." The idea was laughable. "But you'll notice the teaching didn't take very long. The strength was already there." He leaned against the door jam, just enjoying Sara's discoveries.

Sara finally stopped circling the room. "Did I miss anything?"

"No, baby, you gave him a second-degree coffee burn, a couple of puncture wounds and a damned good headache." Dash was clearly laughing at her. "A good day's work."

Sara threw herself into his arms. "You can laugh if you like, but I didn't know any of this before. Nobody looks at the world the way you people do." She was grinning up at him, and his world narrowed suddenly to her precious face.

"I love you," he said deeply. "I love you." And then just, "Sara." And the room tilted as she pushed him over onto the big sofa, landing in his lap and in his strong arms, where she most wanted to be.

“Dash,” Sara whispered. “I’ve never felt like this.” Her small hands cupped his face. She kissed him softly, repeatedly, everywhere she could reach, while he did the same.

They were so absorbed in each other they barely noticed Grange closing the door quietly as he left. In the long minutes that followed, they explored each other in a hushed silence broken only by tender murmurs and lingering sighs.

“Sara.” Dash’s deep voice was hoarse when he finally spoke. “Sara, we’ve got to stop, honey girl.” She continued to press tiny kisses over his face. His big hands were shaking as they smoothed up and down her back. “Sara, please, it’s Grange’s office,” he tried again. “I’d never hear the end of it.”

* * * *

Sara murmured softly as she nuzzled into his neck and inhaled his hot male scent. She was shivering with unsatisfied passion, and she couldn’t seem to stop moving, rubbing against his big body. Dash held her in a hard embrace until at last her trembling body began to relax against his. He was still tense, but his hands on her were gentle.

“Honey, that almost got out of hand,” he said. “I forget good sense when I have you in my arms. I’m very vulnerable to you.” His admission came slowly, reluctantly.

“Relax,” she said, curling up against his strong chest. “I almost never seduce men in the office. Your virtue is safe with me.” She leaned back and winked at him, grinning.

Dash squeezed her, fingers ghosting along her ribs in retaliation for her sassy comment. Her squealing laughter pealed through the room as she struggled for freedom. Finally, breathless and disheveled, she managed to get off his lap, holding his hands so he couldn’t tickle her any more.

“I’ve lost my professional decorum,” she lamented, letting go of his hands so she could try to straighten her skirt.

“Well, I for one don’t miss it,” Dash said with some satisfaction. “You’re an extraordinary woman. Mysterious. Courageous. I like a challenge, and I’m beginning to think I’ll never quite figure you out.”

Sara was clearly startled by the idea. “There’s nothing extraordinary about me,” she enunciated carefully. “I’m shy and plain and scared of everything. I don’t understand this at all.” She waved her arms in the air, at a loss to describe the incredible attraction between them, the instant, irresistible heat neither one of them could fight.

Dash just grinned. “You are so sexy to me, it’s all I can do to keep my mind on the business for five minutes at a time. You say you’re scared, Sara, but you weren’t scared of me today in the training room. And Isaac or Grange would be more than happy to tell you stories of my past missions that would prove how dangerous I can be. I’ve had grown men, trained soldiers, walking carefully to avoid my anger,” he said. “But, on the second day you worked here, you openly argued with me about a requisition. You don’t back down when you believe in something, and that’s all courage really is, Sara.”

Sara stood still and quiet, thinking over his remarkable idea of her. “It’s you,” she said finally. “If I have courage, it’s because of you. You made me argue with you that day, explain my reasons for changing that form. You wanted me to speak up.” Her speech was slow as she thought it through. “More than that, you prodded me into it. And you keep doing it, deliberately saying things that are so totally ridiculous, I know you can’t possibly believe them yourself.”

She was looking at him again. “What are you doing to me?” she asked. Not angry, more puzzled by his behavior and his image of her.

Dash smiled, leaning forward on the sofa. “It’s not me, Sara. It’s the real you coming out to play. I can feel the passion, the spirit in you, I could from the first. I could tell it was there, even when you tried to hide it with your calm face and your prim office clothes. It was driving me crazy. I could sense it in you, and I wanted you to know it, too. I wanted you to let it go. And I wanted to be the man

who got to stand in your fire and burn with you. I still want that, every minute I'm with you." His eyes were fixed on her, watching her pace as she tried to convince him of her imagined shortcomings.

"I'm not a passionate person," she said, but even as she said it, she shook her head. "Or, I wasn't a passionate person until I met you."

"Are you saying it's all my fault?" Dash asked, rising from the sofa with that animal grace which was so much a part of him. "That sounds like every married couple I've ever heard."

He hushed her instinctive protest and took her hands in his, bringing them up to his lips.

"Marry me, Sara. We can spend the next fifty years exploring all the passionate parts of your character and you can blame them all on me."

The glittering intensity of his eyes captured her, burned through her defenses like wildfire. Sara felt as though she was falling into a sea of blue flame, and she couldn't find her balance. She found herself rocked in his arms with no real idea how she came to be there.

"Oh, Sara," his voice was laughing. "It shouldn't be such a shock, honey. You look like I just told you the earth was round."

"I know the earth is round," she said stupidly. She couldn't seem to get her bearings.

"Sara, I love you. Marry me." He pressed a fervent kiss to her parted lips. "You don't have to answer right now." He smiled down at her ruefully. "In fact, it looks like you may be incapable of it. Think about it, Sara. I'll ask you again tomorrow. And the next day, and the next." He punctuated the words with stinging little kisses. "Keep in mind, I don't play by the rules. I'll be thinking up interesting ways of persuading a woman as fiery as you." He was laughing as he kissed her flushed cheek and set her away from him, steadying her when she seemed about to fall.

"But, in the mean time, we need to meet with Carolyn and the backup team to go over our plan. And then, more training for you. I think a session with Carolyn would be helpful."

That brought Sara back to the real world with a snap. “I have to train with Carolyn?” Carolyn’s past record was almost as impressive as Dash’s. Sara wasn’t certain she was up for that level of training, but it gave her something to focus on other than Dash’s stunning proposal. She took a long breath in and lifted her eyes to his.

Dash saw her confusion, her vulnerability apparent in the darkness of her eyes. She looked so young with that lost expression on her face, his protective instincts kicked in full force. He would move heaven and earth to keep her safe and protect her—even from himself.

“Come on, Sara.” His voice was deep and warm, his arm around her tender. “Don’t think so hard. This stalker situation has your whole life up in the air. It’s too much to think about all at once, I understand. I’ll back off for now, if that’s what you want. Just come to the meeting, and we’ll decide what to do with the rest of our lives after this is taken care of.”

Dash offered her his compassion, his understanding.

Sara went with him, her body following him obediently while her mind whirled. Surely Dash wouldn’t propose to a woman unless he was very serious. His reasons were a mystery to her, but he was a powerful and intelligent man, and his word meant something to everyone who dealt with him.

And he loved her. When he said the words, his eyes were lit with a depth of emotion that called up an answering emotion in her. Perhaps it was sudden, but her shock had been as much from her own soaring response to his proposal as from the proposal itself. She opened her mouth to speak, not really knowing what she would say, but realized they were in the middle of the hallway full of agents coming from the other meeting room. She would have to wait for a better time.

Chapter 10

On Wednesday after work, Carolyn and Sara sat at two facing desks in the central office area, watching as the last of the agents filtered out. The backup team would be moving into place about now, having made a highly visible exit earlier in the day, talking about an all-night stakeout, checking the setup of the outside cameras before sneaking back into the building at closing time. Cameras and recording devices were rolling, picking up every sight and sound.

When Dash had left minutes ago with Isaac and Grange to drive away before coming back in through the maintenance tunnel, Sara had been too conscious of the cameras at first to do more than give him a shy hug. He seemed to be letting her set the pace between them since the unanswered proposal. He wasn't drawing away. The heat generated between them had kept them locked together throughout the nights, but he was waiting for something, some word or signal from her.

"Let's order a pizza," Carolyn said. "If we have to stay late, I say make the bosses pay for our dinner." Carolyn was a consummate professional. Sara thought privately that she had missed her true calling. A career on the stage was waiting for such a talented actress any time she chose to give up security work. Carolyn never fell out of her chosen character, and she never missed a cue.

Sara was finding it somewhat more difficult. Her palms were sweating and she was clutching her sheaf of files like a lifeline, her nervous fingers leaving dents in the pile of papers.

"I don't like pineapple," Sara said in a shaking voice, trying to keep up with the game.

Carolyn's look was understanding. "Okay," she said easily. "No pineapple. Got it. Listen, I'll order from here and then just go down to the front to pick it up. They usually get here in about twenty minutes since the pizzeria is just at the end of this block."

"Great." Sara tried to smile. Listening to her friend ordering a pizza with every topping except pineapple, she wondered frantically if she would be expected to eat it. Her dry throat and clenching stomach muscles warned her not to try. She didn't want to throw up on her first real assignment. She needed to feel she was helping in some way, and gaining the respect of her new friends was important to her. The people she worked with were all experienced, but she kept reminding herself that they had all been beginners at one time. Still, throwing up was not an option.

When Carolyn left to get the pizza, Sara wasn't truly worried. The team had repeatedly warned her that the process of security work was a waiting game, and she might have to stay until midnight for several nights in a row to lure in their prey. So when she heard the scrape of the side door opening, she thought perhaps one of the team had needed to adjust some of the equipment or use the washroom.

"Sweetheart, I'm here," Martin's sickeningly sweet voice said.

Sara froze, hardly believing. She turned slowly to look at her ex, feeling the blood drain from her face. Suddenly, it was as if her hands developed palsy, and the papers scattered across the floor.

"Sweetheart, weren't you expecting me?" Martin asked as he walked right up to her. He was dressed in his customary tweed jacket and slacks, picture perfect, as if he had just stepped out of a country gentlemen's catalogue. He looked as comfortable as if he owned the place. "I'm sorry to startle you. I know how nervous you get." He smiled at her.

Sara was surprised. It was almost surreal. He was speaking as if they were still a couple, as if she had never left him, never run halfway across the country to get out from under his control.

Sara tried to swallow, to speak, but it took her two tries to get her

voice to work.

“I didn’t expect to see you again,” was all she was able to say.

Martin frowned. “What? That doesn’t make any sense. I couldn’t let you just go, Sara, a delicate creature like you. You need a man to look after you. You’ve always been sheltered, always been afraid. I knew it was just a matter of time before you realized how much you needed me, so I gave you that time. And now I’m here to bring you home.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.” Sara was very proud that her voice came out at all. She was feeling faint. “I didn’t want you to come here. I didn’t like having you watch me, Martin.”

“You wanted me to come and get you, but you wouldn’t answer my calls. I have every right to watch you.” His voice was harsh and getting louder, as it always did when he wasn’t getting his way. She wasn’t reacting like she was supposed to. She wasn’t running into his arms and begging him to protect her. He reached out for her, but she stepped back quickly.

“You know what happens, Sara, when you back away from me. You know how I hate that.” He was becoming angry now. His face was darkening with temper.

Sara ran around behind the desks, keeping her eyes on him. Where was the backup team? She didn’t want to take her eyes from Martin to look for them.

“I will not go with you, Martin,” she said firmly, though her knees were shaking and she wondered how much longer they would hold her up. “I left you.”

“You left me because you’re too stupid to know what you need! You need my protection in this world. I knew all along your fear would drive you right back to me, into my arms where you know you should be.”

“Your plan didn’t work, Martin. I know you were in my apartment taking my things. I know, and I didn’t run right back to you.” Sara tried to make her voice even, conversational. If she could just stall

until the backup team got into the building, or until Carolyn got back with the pizza, perhaps she would have a chance to get away.

“My plan did work! I just didn’t have quite enough time. Once I get you home with me, everything will be perfect, you’ll see.”

“No.”

Sara was shaking her head, and the sight of her defiance visibly upset him.

Martin lunged for Sara, grabbing her arm as she screamed. He shook her soundly then started pulling her toward the side exit. Sara was pulled along by his hard grip on her arm, slamming against chairs and desks, knocking papers flying.

She gasped in pain as she fell to her knees, then came up holding a pen. “I won’t go with you,” she cried hysterically, and jabbed it into his hand as hard as she could.

Martin shrieked and pulled his hand away. Then he grabbed her with the other hand.

Perversely, the sight of his blood gave her strength. Sara snatched up an empty coffee mug and smashed it into his face with all her might. She kicked his shins and hit him again with the mug, breaking it to bits.

When he screamed like a child and released her arm to cradle his abused nose, she didn’t run as she had been instructed. She pulled a closed laptop computer off a nearby desk and brought it down over his unprotected head with as much force as she could muster.

* * * *

When the backdoor burst open a moment later and Dash and Grange raced in, it was to find Sara screeching like a fishwife and kicking at a man who was crawling on the floor. The backup team and the Sheriff hurried in from the side of the building at the same time. The man saw all the people coming, and crawled toward them as fast as he could.

“Stop!” he called frantically as Sara kicked him again.

To Dash’s critical eye, Martin Brent looked like he needed some help. He had blood streaming down from his nose and from a jagged wound at his temple. His right hand had a pen barrel protruding from it, and his shirt was torn and covered in more blood.

“Stop her! She’s assaulting me!”

“She is, isn’t she?” Dash remarked with clear admiration. He moved to catch Sara in his arms as the Sheriff moved to take Martin Brent into custody. Dash didn’t want Sara to kick the Sheriff or his deputy by accident. It was a struggle to subdue her as she continued to kick and shout at her unfortunate stalker long after he was cuffed.

Dash just spoke soothingly to her until she stopped kicking wildly, wrapping her in his arms and holding her small body against him. He was certain he needed the comfort more than she did.

He almost hadn’t made it in time. Martin Brent had approached the building before they could even get into position, calmly walking in the front door as if he had been invited for tea. To make matters worse, some diligent soul had locked the inner door to the maintenance tunnel, and it had taken Dash and Grange both to break it down.

Racing up through the tunnel with his partners right behind him, his heart pounding to the sound of Sara’s screams, was an experience he never wanted to repeat. And then to find her not only mercifully alive, but defending herself, holding off a much larger attacker. Making that attacker beg for help from the very Sheriff who was there to arrest him. It was like something out of a Hollywood film.

The corners of Dash’s mouth kicked up into a silly grin. He looked around to see that most of the team members were snickering, and the Sheriff was trying to hold back a laugh as he read Mr. Brent his rights. The deputy was openly watching Sara, who was just now beginning to relax beside him. From the awestruck look on the young man’s face, Dash thought he might have some competition to worry about. It was apparent the young man was in love.

Grange, Isaac and Carolyn were off to one side with Walt Burgess, who was smiling like a proud papa.

“That girl’s got some talent,” Burgess remarked pleasantly, then let out a braying laugh.

The whole room broke up with laughter, with hardened agents holding on to each other and leaning on walls and furniture to keep themselves upright when the comedy of the situation weakened their knees. Finally, after what seemed like forever, they were able to get control of themselves.

Even the Sheriff, a stern man in his late forties, was having a hard time keeping his professional demeanor. He kept clearing his throat, and when he looked at his bloodied and beaten prisoner, he couldn’t stifle the wide grin on his face as he radioed for a medic.

Dash hugged Sara to him.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m okay,” Sara said, frowning a little. “But—”

“But what?”

“I hurt my foot somehow.”

“Was that when you were kicking him, honey?” he asked with a grin.

“You’re not taking this very seriously,” Sara complained, pouting up at him. Her eyes were still very wide, but a little smile lit her face.

“Don’t ever think that, Sara, do you hear me? Christ! It took years off my life, hearing you scream and not being able to get to you fast enough. We weren’t even in place yet.” His voice broke and he swallowed convulsively, hauling her in tight against him.

“Dash, I’m teasing,” Sara said instantly. “I’m fine.”

She reached up, smoothing his hair back and leaning into his big body. Her arms circled his strong neck and she clung to him. “I told him I wouldn’t go with him,” Sara said softly. “I argued.”

“I was listening through the ear wire,” Dash said into her hair, rubbing circles on her back. “We all had wires. It’s all recorded.”

“Oh, dear.” Sara was upset.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Dash was instantly concerned at her worried tone.

“I swore at him,” Sara said, concerned. “I called him terrible names, and it’s all on tape!”

Dash lost his composure then, roaring with laughter, wiping the tears from his eyes as he tried to get himself under control. Sara wriggled and pushed away from him to stand at arm’s length and frown in annoyance. He only laughed harder.

Grange heard the last remark, having come with the young deputy to ask for Sara’s statement.

“You stabbed a pen right into his hand,” Grange said slowly. “You probably gave him a concussion, and you definitely broke the man’s nose. His face will never be the same. You ruined his designer clothes. You even kicked him in the ass and a few other places.” The men in the room winced. “And he’s going to jail. But your main worry is that you called him names on tape?”

“Bad names,” Sara emphasized. “Really bad.”

Dash had himself almost under control, but that set him off again. He bent over double and propped his hands on his legs and laughed with sheer relief.

Grange shook his head with obvious puzzlement and turned questioningly to Isaac, who shrugged.

“You’ll never understand it. Don’t strain yourself trying,” Carolyn commented acerbically. “Come on, Sara, let’s check you over for injuries. I have medic training, and I see that you’re favoring one foot. You may have broken a toe.”

Sara just nodded. “Thanks,” she said.

Carolyn examined her, but quickly stated that a selection of bruises and a scraped knee were the worst of her damages.

Dash stood by, talking to the deputy, who was going over his initial investigation and Dash’s first contact with the Sheriff days before.

Sara looked back at Dash, who was standing quietly, watching as

Martin Brent was led away moaning and complaining about his injuries.

Sara shivered, inexplicably certain suddenly that Martin Brent should be very, very grateful to be alive to complain. The look on Dash's face...

He turned suddenly and looked into her eyes. The blue intensity of his gaze held her rooted to the spot. He had no trouble reading her fear.

"Don't be afraid of me," he said, his voice low and fierce.

Sara moved closer to his side, pulled by the magnetism of his presence.

"You must know I'd never do anything to hurt you. I want to kill that bastard for scaring you, for putting his hands on you. I want him dead. I want his blood on my hands." His voice was low and vibrating with feeling.

Dash was trying hard not to snarl. Sara was looking at him with those wide eyes and all but shivering with fear. To hell with it. She needed to know what she was dealing with. He wasn't going to apologize for his anger when another man wanted to abuse his woman.

Sara took his big hands in both of hers, and rubbed them slowly. "Now, his blood is on your hands," she said simply.

He looked down, shocked to see that it was true. A small streak of blood had transferred from Sara's hand to his. Martin Brent's blood. His instant triumph was savage. He shuddered with the effort it took to contain it.

"On our hands."

"On our hands," Dash repeated, pulling her hands up to kiss them. "God, Sara, I'm sorry."

"Don't! Don't say you're sorry." Her eyes were fierce. "I'm not sorry. *I* fought for myself. I fought for us today. You gave me that." She tried a smile. It was shaky, but genuine. "You showed me how to fight for us."

"I didn't want you to have to fight," Dash told her fiercely. He took a breath and steadied himself, pulling Sara around the corner and into an empty office.

Facing her again, he rumbled, "I don't ever want that for you. I don't want you to know a moment's fear. I want you safe and sheltered and glowing with happiness every day of your life." His voice was very deep as he nuzzled the words into her hands.

"Then you'd better plan on marrying me," Sara said with a little smile, "because nothing makes me glow like you do."

Suddenly, she was crushed against his hot body. "Thank you, God," he muttered, making her laugh. "I feel like I've waited a lifetime for you to agree to this."

Sara sputtered with laughter. "Days! Hours! You make it sound like I've been keeping you in suspense for years!" There was a pause. "How long would you have waited?"

"Well," he said, pulling back to gaze into her eyes, "I was pretty sure that by the time the first grandchild came along I could get my ring on your finger."

Shock was visible on her expressive face. "Grandchild! You were planning to be around that long, were you?"

"Sara, baby, haven't you figured it out yet? I'm not leaving, ever. You thought Brent was bad. Honey, I'd be so much worse." His voice was apologetic, warning her softly.

"You wouldn't stalk me," she protested.

His eyes were serious. "No, honey, I wouldn't do that. If you truly didn't want to be with me, then I would let you go. But, you would have to do the leaving, Sara, because I could never walk away from you. Never." His kiss was tender on her soft lips. "You own my heart," he breathed into her mouth. "You own me."

"I love you," Sara whispered, her voice quaking, "Dash."

Their mouths met and clung in a lush affirmation as Sara melted against Dash's broad chest. It was where she had secretly wanted to be from the moment she first saw him.

A throat clearing in the background made Dash pull back. He grimaced as he looked at his friend.

"If you have a moment, the deputy would like Sara's statement," Grange said. "It's safe out there. Brent is locked in the back of the cruiser outside."

Dash understood that Grange meant it was safe for him, with the temptation of murdering Brent removed for the moment. He nodded his thanks.

"You have a habit of interrupting," Dash complained in jest, needling his friend.

Grange picked up the change in mood instantly. "Well, I could have let Isaac come instead," he mused, hearing the other man behind him, "but the kinky bastard might have just watched."

Isaac stopped short. "Did I just miss something worth watching?" he asked, looking interested. "I'm left cleaning up your messes, and I don't get any of the rewards. Maybe Sara should kiss me to help me get over my disappointment."

The sudden hiss behind Isaac startled everyone, as Carolyn turned on her heel and marched back out through the door she had just entered.

Grange stiffened and threw Isaac a look. "Great work," he bit out, pushing past Isaac in the doorway to follow Carolyn.

"Shit." Isaac ran one hand through his already tousled hair. "I didn't mean that, Sara, I was joking. You know that, right?" His comment was addressed to Sara, but his eyes were on Dash.

"I know." Dash frowned slightly, obviously considering. He looked at his friend then looked out the door where Carolyn and Grange had gone. "Uh, Isaac," he said, then grimaced and shook his head.

"Your business," he finally said.

Isaac grimaced. "Yeah, if I don't screw it up before it even gets started," he muttered as he walked out.

Epilogue

A few days after the successful arrest of her stalker, Sara supervised while Dash and Isaac loaded her hand-carved rocking chair into the back of the truck. Dash had insisted on moving everything she owned out of her tiny apartment and into his home without delay. He generously allowed her as much time as she needed to plan their wedding, but only if she was in his bed. Privately, Sara thought he was being a bit high-handed, but since she didn't really want to be apart from him, either, she didn't argue.

The life she had dreamed of was finally beginning. Martin Brent had confessed to entering Sara's apartment and stealing some of her personal items. He was still trying to claim he did it all after an invitation from Sara, but the card he was using to prove it was printed out on a computer, and the general belief was that he had printed it himself. Even his court-appointed lawyer hadn't seemed too impressed with that evidence.

"I could kill that Nina," Carolyn muttered beside her. She was watching Nina approach Grange, who was coming down the steps of Sara's building carrying a large box. "She's got real nerve showing up here. How did she know where you lived, anyway?" Her usually smooth Southern voice was harsh.

The two friends watched Nina lean in close and trail one red-tipped talon down Grange's arm. Grange glanced down and subtly moved away. It was the best he could do, as Nina was completely blocking the small gate.

Carolyn was grinding her teeth, but she couldn't seem to look away. From such a distance, Sara wasn't sure about Nina's exact

choice of words, but her non-verbal offer was plain to see.

"I'm sure Grange won't have anything to do with her," Sara reassured her friend. She didn't know the story, but it was obvious that Carolyn was upset by Nina's presence.

"He can do whatever—or whoever—he wants," Carolyn said fiercely. She walked away and climbed up into the truck.

Sara turned to follow when she was grabbed from behind and swung into a pair of hard arms. She shrieked in surprise, even though she knew it was Dash.

"Last but not least," he stated smugly as he carried a laughing Sara to his jeep. "Isaac will drive the stuff out to the ranch and we'll unload while you two ladies cook something appropriately hearty to reward us poor soldiers for all our hard work."

Dash set Sara on her feet and claimed a slow kiss and then another, tasting her mouth, lingering. "And then after dinner, we'll get rid of our friends as fast as possible, and you can reward me personally. Very personally."

His deep voice and intense expression made Sara's knees feel weak as he helped her into the jeep. She could hardly wait to get back to the ranch. He shut the door behind her and leaned through the open window to kiss her again.

"Very personally," she agreed softly. "I know the perfect reward." And she leaned forward, slid her cool hand across his cheek, and whispered hotly in his ear. He whistled through his teeth and backed away from her, grinning.

"Damn. Anytime you want, baby. Anywhere you want. I'm all yours."

Sara smiled. "Anywhere? Then take me home, Dash."

He kissed her hand and held it to his heart, thanking the powers that be for his good fortune that this sweet woman was his. He just knew she was the missing piece of his own soul. From the first time he had seen her, he had just known.

"Home," he said tenderly. "Yes, I'll take you home."

THE END

<http://www.sirenpublishing.com/lainakenney>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laina Kenney is a classically trained singer/instructor with a regular job and a deep love of the written word. Her family is supportive of (or perhaps just resigned to) a house full of books in every genre, with ancient history and romance taking up the majority of the space. She cheerfully admits to having a bizarre sense of humor and enough shiny accessories for any ten women. One of the greatest joys in her life is exploring the wonder of testosterone, both in prose and in person.



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com