

Loose Id

DEANNA LEE



STILL WATERS

A KYRA MORAY MYSTERY

Praise for the writing of Deanna Lee

Undressing Mercy

Undressing Mercy was an incredible gem of a story that I never expected to come across... The fact that it was so very different and extraordinary from any erotic romance I've read, and that it left me with all the emotions of the characters, which were a mix running from raw to sweetly amusing, is why *Undressing Mercy* deserves the Silver Star Award.

-- Dani Jacquel, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

The emotions expressed are wonderfully written and amazingly detailed. The love scenes are hot, hot, hot, and the story will keep you riveted from beginning to end. I loved this story and the way it is presented.

-- Leyna, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Ms. Lee has written a very emotional and passionate story that was thought provoking and made me thankful to have read it. I will definitely recommend this to family and friends.

-- Sheryl, *Coffee Time Romance*

Undressing Mercy is a great book about two people from different races that come together and find a love that will break all barriers... The storyline will keep you turning the pages to see what this couple comes up with next.

-- Angel Brewer, *The Romance Studio*

Undressing Mercy is now available from Liquid Silver Books.

STILL WATERS

A KYRA MORAY MYSTERY

Deanna Lee

LooseId
www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content, graphic language and violence.

Still Waters: A Kyra Moray Mystery

Deanna Lee

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © April 2005 by Deanna Lee

Excerpt of *Why Me?* copyright March 2005 by Treva Harte

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 1-59632-111-3

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Lorri-Lynne Brown, Karen W. Williams

Cover Artist: April Martinez



www.loose-id.com

Chapter One

October 2162

New Orleans, Louisiana

Inspector Kyra Moray frowned as she stood over the dead body of Donna LaRoux in an alley of the French Quarter. When the call had come in, she'd taken one look at the image that had been transmitted to her, and rolled out of bed. As she was the senior inspector of Major Crimes of District 4 in the Big Easy, the strange cases always fell on her desk. Death no longer shocked her, but there were times when it cut at her soul. It also proved that no matter how civilized the world around them might be, humans were essentially primitive and maybe always would be.

"Why do we always get the weird ones?"

Kyra squatted close to the body and looked briefly toward her partner. "That's the way New Orleans treats me."

Sergeant Phil Wilkes grimaced. "Well, being you sucks, and being near you sucks even more."

Kyra smiled briefly and turned to the uniformed officer who had hovered near her since her arrival. "Well?"

"She works in the diner. She began her shift at ten-thirty p.m., and the last time anyone can remember seeing her is three-thirty a.m., when she went on her break. The owner, Noel Valteau, called 911 forty-five minutes later and stated that he'd found one of his employees injured behind the diner. Dispatch called the med-tech team, who called in the discovery of a dead body at four-twenty-three a.m. I arrived on the scene seven minutes later, secured the body, and immediately signaled dispatch for an investigative team."

Constable Ana Salanti stilled and met Kyra's gaze. "I've already transferred my on-scene report to your pocket-pc."

Kyra nodded and looked back at the body positioned carefully on a piece of white canvas and glared at the small wound. It looked like the killer had peeled away the skin. The wound, about two inches above her right breast, was the only mark on the body, and it showed no signs of scabbing or healing. It had been done after she was dead; otherwise, the girl's healing nanobots would have immediately started repairing the damage. She pulled out her p-pc and scanned the report as she stood. It was as clear and precise as the oral report had been.

Her gaze went back to the body. Donna had been pretty once, but death was kind to no one. The nineteen-year-old girl was sprawled brazenly, as if to insinuate that she was far more than just a college kid. It was another slap at her humanity, Kyra thought. The killer had placed the girl in a dirty, smelly alley, naked before the world, with her legs spread as if she were unworthy of any small modesty.

Kyra gazed around the scene as she peeled off nu-skin gloves. Made of a soft, pliable polymer, they molded to the hand like a second skin. The fit, and the thinner material, allowed for little or no loss of touch sensation.

"He did her somewhere else and then brought her back here. There isn't enough privacy here for what he did. Any transient traffic?" She looked pointedly at the uniformed officer as she spoke.

Ana shook her head. "None reported. The alley was empty except for the body and the med-techs when I arrived."

"Get statements from the med-techs, then release them."

"Right away, Inspector." The constable darted off.

Kyra grinned and turned to her partner as the officer hurried away. "You can let the medical examiner in. I'm going to talk to the manager."

Phil grunted. "Why do the street cops think you walk on water?"

"Because I'm a street cop, too." She looked toward the constable, who was taking statements. "I've just got a shiny gold badge to go with it."

"Nothing special about working the street," Phil muttered.

As he exited the privacy screen that shielded the body, Phil motioned to the ME and took a deep breath. He knew without a doubt that he would never have the detachment his partner had when it came to working with the dead. Four months in Homicide had taught him that there was little man wasn't capable of.

The alleyway was bursting with crime scene techs, uniformed cops, and a variety of city personnel, all of whom appeared to have a job on the scene. The two recycler units in the alley had already been marked for confiscation, and a group of men were organizing their removal from the alley.

“What we got?” Dr. Simon Rice paused beside Phil.

“Female victim, nineteen. The inspector will be demanding on this one, Rice; watch your procedures.”

She paused in the entrance of the small office. Noel Valteau sat in a chair; his large frame slumped as if he'd been struck. Kyra had known Noel all of her life, had even sat in his lap as a child during Christmas parades. Dealing with the grief of a man she considered a friend was so much more difficult than dealing with the grief of a stranger. For several seconds she allowed herself the weakness of pity, then put it aside. When you worked for the dead, your own needs and emotions had to take a back seat.

He looked up and met her gaze. “I can't believe she's dead.”

Kyra sat down in front of him and took both of his big hands in hers. “Listen to me, Noel. The only thing you can do for Donna now is answer my questions.”

“I'll try.”

“Do you remember any customers who hassled Donna while she was at work tonight or in the past few weeks, months?”

“No. Don't take with that bullshit in my place. The girls have a right to work in a safe, clean place.” He nodded emphatically. “Customer gets out of hand, I know about it, and it doesn't happen again.”

“So, there have been unruly customers in the past.”

“Not with Donna. She's only been here about six months. Her mother, Cecilia, picked her up from work and dropped her off. Far as I know, she didn't have a man or anything. Just working and going to college.” He shook his head as if to clear it.

“Did Donna normally take her breaks behind the building?”

Noel blushed. “Last month I started enforcing the no-smoking policy in the building. The girls had to go out back. I'm not sure if she was doing it before.”

“How many times did Donna take a smoke break tonight?”

“Don't think she actually smoked, just liked to get out of the building for a while, so maybe twice.”

“Now, Noel, you're thinking this is your fault. That's not true. You didn't hurt Donna, and you didn't do anything to make this happen.” She stood up and met Phil's gaze as he hovered in the doorway of the small office. “Noel, can you give Donna's current employee file to my partner?”

“Yes, of course.”

Surprised, Phil watched Kyra walk away. He hadn't expected to enter the manager's office and find her comforting a witness. Still, he was honest enough with himself to admit

that he knew very little about the woman he'd been partnered with for four months. She didn't confide, and he didn't ask.

When he'd come to New Orleans, he hadn't expected to be assigned to a cop of Kyra Moray's rank. Though when he'd caught sight of the dark-eyed, raven-haired inspector, he hadn't been exactly displeased, either. He'd heard rumors that she'd been Miss New Orleans as a teenager, and that didn't surprise him. So far, he'd refrained from looking her up on the Internet. He didn't think he needed to see his partner and superior officer in a bathing suit.

Kyra walked out into the dining area. The patrons who had been there when the body was found had remained. It didn't surprise her; Valteau's wasn't a tourist stop. They were silent and watchful as she approached.

She inclined her head as she considered her words. "I want to thank you folks for staying and helping us tonight. Tomorrow you'll be called in for interviews; please don't discuss the details of this evening with one another. We need to hear only what you remember." Everyone nodded, still silent. "Everyone but the staff can leave now. Thank you again."

She waited silently as the customers stood and left. Turning her attention to the staff, she gestured to the uniformed officer standing next to her. "Constable Chase will take your statements. After you've given a statement, you can leave, too. You'll also be getting calls for interviews at the station." Kyra checked the time on her comm-u and then looked at the two waitresses. "I know you're scared. It would be difficult not to be under the circumstances. The officer will be happy to drive you both home."

"You'll catch this man?"

Kyra paused and looked at the older woman. "I'll have justice for Donna."

* * * * *

It was different this time. The first ones were a waste. I sincerely regret their loss. This time, however, was so intense. It felt so just. She knew her purpose in the end. I made sure of it. I told her she would always be beautiful and pure. She was born to help me fulfill my mission, and sweet little Donna was honored that I chose her.

The police sent their best to the scene. I knew they would. You'd be so pleased by the appreciation my work has garnered. I'll watch Inspector Moray closely. She's interesting and perhaps the perfect vessel for your return to this world.

"Shit, I hate this."

Kyra looked briefly at her partner as she reached out to push the doorbell. "Just don't cry. I can't stand it when you do that."

Phil grinned at her but had his face neutral by the time the door was thrown open.

The woman blinked against the glare of the porch light and frowned at them equally before focusing on Kyra. "What the hell do you want?"

Kyra held up her badge. "I'm Inspector Kyra Moray with the NOPD, and this is my partner, Sergeant Phil Wilkes. We'd like to come in."

The woman's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why?"

"Mrs. LaRoux, we need to come in," Kyra repeated softly. "It's about Donna."

"She's at work." Cecilia LaRoux backed away from the door, still frowning, and then turned from the door as Kyra and Phil followed her into a small, neat living room.

Kyra sat down as Cecilia did. She'd done this more times than she'd like to admit, and each time it was as if it were the first. There was no way to make it easy, and the woman before her didn't seem the type to react well, no matter how the news was delivered. "Donna has been killed."

Cecilia was still for a minute; then with a burst of energy, she launched herself, fists flying. Kyra took one good punch to the jaw before she grabbed hold of the screaming woman and restrained her. She glared at Phil until he pulled the struggling woman off her. Rubbing her jaw, she watched him push Cecilia back down in her chair. The woman was sobbing and moaning, curled tightly in a fetal position.

"Call the station."

"Oh, come on. You aren't going to arrest her, are you?"

Kyra stared at her partner for one long, incredulous minute, and then cleared her throat. "Call the station and have them send out a grief counselor."

* * * * *

Kyra was still rubbing her jaw when she entered the ME's office at 9:00 a.m. She hadn't gotten much sleep, but then, it was hard to sleep with the way her night had ended.

Dr. Jeffrey Parker was considered by some to be the biggest pain in the ass in New Orleans, but he was the best ME in the city. He never settled for the obvious until there was no choice, treated every body as if it were a person he knew in life, and had the utmost respect for the dead. For those reasons, he and Kyra got along just fine.

She found him eating a toaster pastry and staring at the remains of Donna LaRoux. "Blueberry?"

"What else?" Jeffrey motioned toward a box sitting on a table away from the body. "Help yourself. The toaster is broken, though."

Kyra hopped up onto the counter and snagged the box. She should have felt guilty for taking his last one, but she didn't. Opening the foil package, she looked from the body to the man. "Well?"

"I should have gone to the scene." He sighed and shrugged. "Rice is a good kid, but I would have liked to have started with her in the field."

"Just tell me, Jeffrey."

"No rape, though she did have sex within the last forty-eight hours. I pulled a semen sample. There is some sign of strangulation, but that isn't what killed her. The wound on her chest is postmortem. Odd thing, he didn't dig deep ... took all three layers of skin, but there's little damage done to the flesh around it or the muscle underneath. It was a clean incision, precise and thoughtful."

"Then, what?"

"I don't know yet."

"What the hell do you mean, you don't know?"

Jeffrey sighed. "The bruising on her neck is old, probably at least two days." He grimaced. "I'll know more once I get her open. The full body imagery scan, which I've done twice, suggests something that I'd like to investigate physically before I make any reports concerning the cause of death. I found something weird in her mouth."

"What?"

"A vial of bone dust. Analysis suggests poultry, probably chicken. We'll know for sure in about an hour."

"Chicken bones?" Kyra slid down off the counter. "Bones?"

"Yeah." He motioned at a silver tray near the body.

"In her mouth?"

"Yes, just pushed into the mouth. Not shoved down the throat; she didn't choke to death. Though there is some indication that she suffocated or was deprived of oxygen for an extended period of time before she died."

"You get her medical history, yet?"

"No, her mother is catatonic." Jeffrey looked at her finally. "Heard she punched you in the face."

Kyra nodded and rubbed her jaw again. "Yeah, it was certainly a first. I've had people get angry and curse me, but never had one attack me before." She tossed the empty pastry wrapper into a recycle unit. "Where are her personal belongings?"

"Evidence bag is on my desk. Haven't gotten to them yet. I know this is murder." He shook his head. "Hell, it couldn't be anything else."

Kyra picked up the evidence bag with the vial while Jeffrey walked across the room to inventory Donna's purse. "There are some carved letters in the glass."

Jeffrey nodded as he slipped on a pair of gloves. "Yeah, can't make heads or tails of it."

"Ah, crap." Kyra groaned and put the bag down. "It's a freaking Voodoo token."

He looked up, and grinned. He'd been waiting for her to connect the dots. "How can you hate Voodoo?"

Kyra glared at him. "Find out how he killed her."

"No worries, I'll get there. I always do."

"Are you positive she wasn't raped?"

"Only she would be positive, and we can't ask her. I will tell you that there is no physical indication that she was forced sexually."

She picked up the evidence bag and shoved it in her carryall. "Where's the evidence log?"

"I have it." Jeffrey picked up the flat-pad and waved it.

Kyra walked over to him and took the pad. She scrolled through the contents, found the vial in the list, and signed it out. "I'll call you later."

"The bruising on your jaw ..."

"I have my nanobots disengaged."

"Why?" Jeffrey's confusion was evident as his gaze traveled to her jaw, where the bruise was terrifically highlighted against her pale skin.

Kyra shrugged. She wasn't interested in discussing her issues with nanotechnology. "See you later."

Jeffrey looked back to Donna. "Hell of a way to start a Tuesday, kid."

Kyra sat back at her desk and stared at the picture of Donna LaRoux. She closed the file and lifted her gaze to Commander Ethan Baker. "I really don't want to do this."

"I understand."

She stood and tossed the evidence bag on top of the file. "It's a game for him. The bones mean nothing."

"You'll go see the Priestess Clara and ask her. She's a knowledgeable practitioner of Voodoo, and it is your responsibility to consider ..."

"Oh, for the love of God, a Voodoo priestess is not a legitimate lead." Kyra slouched into her chair and crossed her arms over her breasts.

Ethan reached over, brushed the evidence bag aside, and opened the folder. "Look at her, Kyra. She was nineteen years old. He left her dead and naked in an alley."

Kyra dropped her gaze to the photo. "I know, Commander. I stood over her." She straightened and stood. "I will visit Clara Tibideaux, and I will question her about the use of chicken bones in the practice of her religion. I will not, however, under any circumstances treat this case like a Voodoo *thing*. It's what he wants, but he won't get it. I'm not going to plaster this all over the media vids."

"I know you'll do what needs to be done despite your personal feelings."

Kyra pulled her jacket on and shoved the folder and evidence bag in her workbag. "I'll go off duty after I visit the witch."

"She prefers *priestess*," Ethan called after her, grinning. He would have given anything to be a fly on the wall for that meeting.

Kyra paused and looked across the hood of her transport to her partner. "Look, why don't you head home. I'll be going off duty after this consultation anyway."

Phil grinned. "Are you sure you can handle her?"

"I can handle an ancient Voodoo priestess," Kyra muttered. "Go home to your wife."

He didn't need any further encouragement. She watched him trot off to the rocket-cycle he drove to work. With a grunt of dissatisfaction, she jerked open the door of her vehicle and climbed in. Settling into the driver's seat, Kyra allowed herself a few moments of admiration. She'd purchased the new transport only six weeks before, and its sleek lines seduced her every time she saw it.

When she'd gone to purchase a new vehicle, it had been with the intention of buying a sensible and common vehicle. She'd come home with an energy-guzzling all-terrain vehicle that was hardly sensible. Engaging the engine, she thought briefly about the hover system she'd been shopping around for. She'd have to get one soon; department regulations required it.

Clara Tibideaux lived outside the city, in the bayou. The mean old witch was interesting in a horrifying sort of way. Kyra grimaced as she pulled out of the station parking lot; it just wasn't going to be a good end to her day.

She used the thirty-minute drive to Clara's house to gather her own thoughts about the case. What the ME had told her about the neck bruising, she'd expected. The bruises had been old and faint. The vial of bones had been a surprise. There had been no obvious trauma at the crime scene except for the bit of skin he'd taken with him. That wound wouldn't have been enough to kill her. Poison? It had crossed her mind, something fast-acting and easy to get hold of. Most poisons were rigorously controlled -- well, most synthetic poisons. If Voodoo was in the mix, he could have taken a poison out of his own backyard. People who had a rudimentary knowledge of Voodoo studied the plants and herbs used in the faith.

She slowed down as she approached the turnoff that would take her to Clara. Would she ever be comfortable with the woman? Somehow, she doubted it. With serious dread, Kyra turned off the highway and onto the dirt road that would eventually lead to Clara's driveway. She hadn't seen Clara in four blessed years. It had been a case that had brought her to Clara's door then, too. Four years since she'd learned the truth behind her mother's death and about her own conception. Pushing the past firmly out of her mind, she focused on the road and hoped like hell that Clara would at least be civil.

Turning onto Clara's narrow driveway, she glanced toward the dock that stretched out into the swamp. The murky brown water looked uninviting and ominous. She already knew how it would smell -- stale, dead. After hitting a series of potholes that qualified as small craters, she parked in front of the house and got out. The old witch was standing on the porch, hands on her hips as if she were expecting Kyra.

Clara's hair was pinned up neatly, her midnight-dark skin smooth and shiny. Most would have never guessed she was nearly a hundred years old. Kyra knew that Clara had less than half the standard nanobots recommended for good health, and had taken the anti-aging shots only because she wanted to live long enough to see her son's body recovered. She shook that loose; focusing on Clara's son wouldn't serve her now.

Stalling, she looked out into the swampy waterway just off Clara's driveway and wondered briefly if Clara even bothered with proximity security against alligators. She doubted it; she also doubted that any self-respecting alligator would come near the old witch.

Kyra swung out of the transport and cast a wary glance toward the scarecrow prominently displayed in the front yard. God, that thing was creepy. Clara dressed the scarecrow in her murdered son's clothes and had since he'd gone missing more than fifteen years before.

"Detective Moray."

"Inspector," Kyra corrected evenly. "I have a couple of questions to ask you, Clara."

"I don't work free." Clara crossed her arms over her breasts and glared. "Especially for a bitch cop."

"As always, the NOPD is willing to pay you a consultation fee for your answers," Kyra snapped. She knew that Clara made nearly fifty thousand credits a year on consultations with the police and with the DA's office. It never ceased to amaze her. "A reasonable fee."

Clara snorted and turned away from her. "Come on, then."

Kyra walked up to the porch and paused at the entrance. The house smelled of cinnamon cookies and incense. Disgruntled, she walked into the foyer and followed Clara down the hall to the room used as an office. The last time Kyra had been in the room, she'd been ridiculously scared. Now all the theatrics and bad attitude just pissed her off.

She removed the evidence bag and put it on the table as she sat down. "What does this mean to you?"

Clara picked up the bag and opened it. "I can touch it?"

"Yes." Kyra leaned back in the chair and schooled her expression.

The vial rolled in the bag briefly before Clara's nimble fingers caught and withdrew it. The glass was cloudy with bone dust; the cork plug still looked damp.

"The letters are gibberish -- they have no meaning beyond making you waste time. A vial of bones such as this is a powerful talisman, especially in the hands of a dedicated practitioner of the art. You found this on a body?"

"In a body."

"The mouth," Clara surmised, and turned her head toward the window briefly.

Kyra frowned at the scar she saw running around Clara's neck, and pushed aside thoughts of Clara's past. "Yes."

"Young woman, an impersonal killing."

"There is nothing impersonal about murder," Kyra snapped and stood.

"Sit down, Inspector," Clara demanded, and didn't continue until Kyra had taken a seat. "He didn't bother to know her well. If they had a relationship, it was one of fantasy for her. She would have known little about him that was actually true. It wasn't about hatred or passion. Humans both hate and love obsessively; most murder is born out of one of the emotions. This one was not. He likely killed her in a method that left her relatively unmarred."

"We have no cause of death."

"Poison -- one that is fast-acting and unusual, but not untraceable. He would want no doubts that she was murdered."

"Why leave the bones?" Kyra forced herself to sit up straight and drop her hands into her lap. "Other than that vial, there was no other sign of Voodoo."

"It's a talisman to draw evil." Clara put the vial back into the bag and sealed it carefully. "It represents the victim."

"She was a nineteen-year-old college student. There is nothing evil about that."

"She existed. Perhaps he found her tempting in someway, and blamed her for it. He didn't assault her."

"No, but he peeled almost an inch and a half of skin off her."

"When he escalates to rape, you'll have a different sort of killer on your hands." Clara stood. "Now, I'm finished."

"Wait." Kyra stood as well. "You haven't told me what you felt from the object."

"The sample is too tainted with the hands of others. I can't get a clear impression of him except to say that he is evil and he isn't done. I'm finished, Inspector. You've brought evil into my home, *again*." Clara glared briefly. "I must cleanse now. Leave."

Kyra sucked in a deep breath and tried to smile. The mayor favored Clara, and Kyra would hear about it if she lost her temper. "Good day, then. I'll see the department pays you."

"You do that."

* * * * *

Kyra looked around her empty apartment with a soft smile. Leaving murder and her day at the door, she dumped her bag in a chair in the small foyer and went into the kitchen.

She poured herself a large glass of milk, kicked off her shoes, and curled her toes briefly into the lush beige carpet.

Her home was in many ways her only haven from the work she did. The walls and carpet were a neutral, calming beige, while the furniture was a riot of red and black. In the living room, she saw her personal comm-u station's blue message waiting light blinking wildly. She hit the play button as she set down her glass and shrugged out of her suit jacket.

"Kyra, this is Grandmother. Give me a call. I want to confirm our attendance to the Halloween masquerade ball at the Drakes'. Don't forget, you need pick up your costume. You are just going to love what I picked out for you."

"I just bet I will," Kyra muttered grimly. Last year, she'd been shoved into a corset and a white wig. This year, she was going in as little as possible. The ballroom of the Drakes' ancestral home was the most poorly ventilated room in the entire state.

"Now, I want you to promise me you'll have a date for the ball this year. No excuses, young lady."

Kyra shot the station an obscene hand gesture and then blushed with shame. Her grandmother had reduced her to a juvenile state in a matter of minutes just by leaving a message. She sat down on the fire-red couch and snagged her glass of milk. It was, she decided, a good day for a stiff drink. It was too bad she'd given that up.

Her grandmother's transmission ended, and her friend Glory's wailing filled the room. "I left him. The bastard just isn't worth all of this torture, Kyra. You were right, you know. You warned me he was no good. I'm just no kind of friend for not listening. I'm at Still Waters down the street from your place. Come be with me."

Kyra finished her milk in one hasty gulp.

She found Glory at a small table near the dance floor, with three empty glasses already on the table. Glory James was a five-foot-five walking bit of sex, and most men found her completely irresistible. Her blonde hair was cut short and spiky; her dark blue eyes were framed with thick lashes highlighted with blue glitter. The glitter also happened to match her lipstick.

They had been best friends since elementary school. Once they'd had a great deal in common, but age had blunted those things. Now, all they had was a friendship that had been built on tragedy and loneliness.

Kyra sat down wearily and moved the glasses to one side of the table. "Tell me, Glory, didn't you decide six months ago that a man wasn't worth a hangover?"

Glory giggled and shrugged. "Getting drunk for me, not because of him."

Kyra leaned back in the chair and laughed. "Okay, tell me what happened."

Glory grimaced and propped her chin on her hand. "I'd much rather just drink."

"If you wanted to just drink, you wouldn't have called me."

Glory signaled one of the waitresses with a resigned sigh. Kyra ordered a soft drink when the waitress came with Glory's fourth drink.

"He was cheating on me. Just like you said."

There were times when she hated being right. She plucked up Glory's hand and patted it gently. "Don't think about what I said. If I'd been a real friend, I wouldn't have run a check on him anyway."

Glory laughed. "Well, I'm glad you did. I kept my promise -- never gave him access to my money and kept everything I bought in my name. He was so much older than I was, I should have realized that his motives weren't exactly pure. We had zero in common, yet he always seemed to be absolutely fascinated by everything I said or did."

"No one is immune to that sort of attention."

"I've learned my lesson; he doesn't get a second chance."

That was a relief to hear. Kyra would have had a hard time trying to explain beating Jerry Capshaw to death. She fiddled with her paper drink coaster until the waitress returned with her soft drink. She motioned to the waitress to remove the empty glasses and then pointed at Glory's full one.

"That's her last one."

The waitress nodded with a grin and sauntered off.

"Oh, come on, don't ruin my fun."

"Last one. You aren't going to spend the night throwing up on me." Kyra rubbed her neck and nearly groaned aloud when she caught sight of the entrance to the bar. "Did you tell him where you'd be?"

"Nope." Glory turned toward the entrance and groaned. "It doesn't help that he's so pretty."

"Most womanizers are." Kyra glared at Jerry as he approached. "You aren't going with him."

"Don't want to," Glory promised solemnly.

Jerry strode toward the table and glared at Kyra. "Should have known she would be with her dyke cop friend."

Kyra let the insult slide right off. He'd been calling her dyke since she'd declined his generous offer of sex four months before. "Go away, Jerry. She's not interested in talking to you."

"She's coming home, where she belongs."

She watched him rock on his feet and then start to reach out for her. "Touch her, and you'll pay for it."

"You have nothing to say in this!" He pointed a finger at her as he spoke, then grabbed Glory's arm.

Kyra slid out of her chair and wrapped her fingers around his wrist. "Let her go."

He released Glory's arm and jerked against Kyra's hold. Kyra responded by punching him in the mouth and slamming him on the empty table next to them. Her knee in his back, she pulled out her restraints and waved them in front of Jerry's face.

"Two options, asshole. You beat it, or you're getting new jewelry tonight."

"Fuck you! I haven't done anything."

"We got a problem here, folks?"

Kyra looked up and found herself smiling at one of the best-looking men she'd seen in a long time. "Not unless he pushes it."

The man bent down and looked at Jerry's face. "Are you pushing her?"

"No." Jerry ground out through clenched teeth.

Kyra backed off but knew what was coming. Jerry just wasn't a smart man, and he backhanded her across the face. She took a step back, but didn't stumble. "That is assaulting a police official, Jerry."

Glory bounded up from the chair. "You bastard! How dare you hit her ..."

Kyra grabbed Glory and shoved her back. "Put your hands on the table, Jerry."

"Fuck you." He reached for her again, but the man who'd interrupted them stepped between them.

"I don't tolerate violence in my place."

"I got this." Kyra wiped blood from her mouth with the back of her hand and walked around the man she now assumed owned the bar. Music and conversation had ground to a halt. She kicked Jerry in the knee and shoved him to the ground while he howled. "Jerald Capshaw, Jr. You are under arrest for assaulting a police official. You have the right to remain silent during transport." She pressed her knee into the small of his back and fixed the restraints to his wrists.

The restraints immediately fit to his skin, their magnetic connection stiffening his posture briefly before he went slack beneath her as the restraints pumped a calmer into him.

"You have the right to be represented by an advocate during questioning. If you cannot afford representation, it will be provided at no cost to you. Any and all statements made during questioning will be recorded and used within the confines of your criminal trial. Failure to provide the truth will result in additional charges being filed against you. Do you understand these rights as they have been defined?" She activated her wrist comm-u, input the code for dispatch, and shot a look in Glory's direction. She looked absolutely fascinated. Pissed, but fascinated.

Kyra sighed. "Inspector Moray. I need a transport at Still Waters on St. Anne Street."

Putting all of her weight on Jerry, she ended the transmission. "Now, Jerry, I'm going to make things very clear to you. Assaulting an officer of the law in the fine city of New

Orleans is a serious offense. Pissing me off is just one more way to ensure that you get the nastiest cellmate I can find. Trust me; I got a few in there who would love to get ahold of a pretty boy like you.” She stood and helped Jerry to his feet.

“You’re bleeding.”

She turned to the owner of the bar when he spoke, and offered her hand. “Yeah, it’s a habit. Inspector Kyra Moray.”

He took her hand. “Alexander Waters. My friends call me Alex. It’s a pleasure to have you here, Inspector.”

“You can send me the bill for damages.”

Alex laughed. “We’ll call it an entertainment expense.”

“Never seen a woman lay a man out like that before.”

Alex leaned against the bar as Kyra escorted her prisoner out the door. “Yeah, Jake, put him on the list. I don’t want him back in my place.”

Jake Banner, the bartender, nodded and pulled out a p-pc. “What’s his name?”

“Jerald Capshaw.” Alex picked up his water bottle and looked toward Kyra’s abandoned friend. “Think I’ll keep her friend company until she comes back.”

Ignoring Jake’s laughter, Alex strolled between the tables and sat down in the chair Kyra had abandoned. “You okay?”

Glory shrugged. “Thought I loved him, ya know?” She shrugged. “Kyra, she’s a great friend.”

“She’s interesting.”

“Yeah, men always say that.” Glory met his gaze. “I’m Glory James.”

He grinned and took her hand gently. His gaze drifted over her pixie features and denim-blue eyes. “I’ve never met a woman more aptly named in my life. I’m Alex Waters.” He motioned toward the door. “Your friend got a man?”

“Nope, she’s a real ballbuster. Men don’t stick around much, especially when they figure out she doesn’t think she needs a man.” She grinned then. “Never seen her arrest anyone before. I think I’ll ask to go on a ride-along.”

“Not in a million years.” Kyra grinned as she returned to the table. “Come on, I’ve called you a cab.”

“Geez, Kyra, you have a big bruise!” Glory’s bottom lip quivered.

“I had it already,” Kyra soothed. “Got it last night. Now, come on. He won’t be around for at least twenty-four hours. Pack your stuff, and I’ll help you move out tomorrow.”

“I’ll pack his shit,” Glory muttered. “I love that apartment. He can move out.”

“Then we’ll start paperwork on a restraining order in the morning.” Kyra took a deep breath and helped Glory up. “I’ll be back in a moment to handle her bill.”

Alex nodded, though he did not intend to let Kyra pick up Glory's tab.

"The owner of the bar sure is sexy."

Kyra laughed as she flipped the cabdriver a fifty credit. "Take her straight home. No detours."

"Anything you want, Inspector."

Kyra looked over Glory's face. "Look, you sleep and get this drunk out of your system. No man is worth this sort of mess."

Glory kissed Kyra gently on her bruise and sighed. "You need a facial. Come by next week, and we'll get you one." She held on to the door briefly. "Turn on the bots and let them take care of the bruising."

Kyra shut the door carefully and tapped the roof of the hover-cab. Shoving her hands into her pockets, she focused on the door of Still Waters. It was midnight blue with swirls of other blues in the paint -- just like water. The building itself was white brick, and clean. Alex Waters took a great deal of pride in his establishment, and it showed. The neon sign proclaiming *Still Waters* was bright; she could make out the light blue lettering from her bedroom window.

When she re-entered the building, Alex was behind the bar. At five-nine, she appreciated a tall man. He was at least six-five. He had milk-chocolate skin, and his hair was cut close to his head. His shoulders were broad. Nicely defined chest muscles rippled under a too tight T-shirt. The man was certainly the best scenery she'd come across in a long time. She slid onto a stool and shrugged out of her jacket. That wasn't something she normally did in public. Her holster and pulse weapon always drew attention she didn't want. Still, she figured the men in the bar were past hitting on her after her display with Jerry.

Alex set a glass of ice water on a coaster in front of her and then offered her a damp cloth. "For the blood."

She shook her head and wiped her mouth. "He's been pushing me for months. He's just lucky there were witnesses." She scrubbed at the back of her hand and dipped the cloth in the ice water to get it wetter. "Sorry about the disturbance. I should have met him at the door. I saw him come in."

"Then your friend might have been tempted to take him back."

Kyra jerked and met his gaze. "What?"

"You let him hit you, Inspector."

She couldn't deny it.

"What's Glory's total?"

"On me." Alex moved down the bar to pour a drink and settle with several customers before coming back to her. "Don't look at me that way. I run a safe place for women. My

man at the door didn't do his job. If he had, Capshaw wouldn't have had a chance to punch you in the face."

"I'll keep that in mind if I ever have to drown my sorrows."

Alex shook his head and smiled. "You don't drink."

"What makes you say that?"

"A woman like you, who likes to be in charge, wouldn't drown herself in alcohol. You might indulge in a two-pound box of fine Swiss chocolate, but not alcohol. You've also never been here before, and since you live within walking distance, that says a lot."

"You keep chocolate around for such occasions?"

Alex laughed. "Tell you what -- come back on Friday."

"Sign out front says you're closed this Friday."

"Yeah. It's my birthday. The door is invitation-only that night." He reached out and touched her face. His hand wasn't soft, but firm and work-roughened. "Just how did you get that bruise?"

"A victim's family member didn't like the news I had to deliver." She stilled the urge to lean into his hand. Sitting up straighter, she continued. "I'll bring Glory. She might like this place sober, too. She'll need a little fun after this week."

He took the cloth from her and wiped at her cheek gently. "Your friend has interesting choices in lipstick color."

"Yeah. She's a rainbow, all right." Kyra grimaced, remembering the bright blue glitter that had graced Glory's lips.

He leaned on the bar and looked over her face. "Might like your face if it wasn't such a mess."

"It's pretty much always a mess," Kyra admitted. She pulled on her jacket and looked at him.

"You should have three times the normal on nanobots. Fifty on the civilian end, and a hundred because you're a cop." Alex dropped his hand and met her gaze. "You have them deactivated."

"Yes."

Alex was silent for a moment, then nodded. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

Kyra grinned and slid off the stool. "Sure. If you're lucky, I won't punch you."

"I was just wondering -- do you date black men?"

So blunt, Kyra thought. The question wasn't surprising. Despite what many people wanted to believe, racism was alive and well throughout the southern NAU. Interracial relationships were commonplace, of course, but some old-school politicians and religious zealots still considered it immoral. After the second civil war and before the third, the people

of North America had been divided along a great many lines, most of them race-related. It had taken them a long time to recover, both socially and technologically.

“I don’t date men based on their ethnic background.”

But, really, what woman could deny a man that looked like him? He was the sort of man a woman could just wrap herself around and feed on for days.

“What do you base it on?”

“The size of their cock.” She laughed at his slack-jawed expression. “See you on Friday, Mr. Waters.”

Chapter Two

“Bitch cop.”

Kyra leaned back in her chair and shared a glance with her partner. “That’s the second time in two days I’ve been called that.”

Phil shrugged and stood away from the wall he’d been leaning on. “Guess that’s why I got a whole bunch of condolence cards after I was assigned to be your partner.”

Kyra pressed her lips together to keep from smiling, and turned to the woman. “Mrs. LaRoux, it is very important that you answer our questions.”

“Fucking lying bitch cop.”

Kyra sat back in the chair she’d taken and took a purely selfish moment to glare at Cecilia LaRoux. She regretted not arresting her when she had the chance. “We aren’t getting anything.” She stood and turned to Phil. “Go find her doctor, and tell him that when she becomes more lucid, we need to talk to her.”

Cecilia LaRoux grabbed Kyra’s arm then, digging her in nails. “My Donna ain’t dead. She just can’t be.”

Kyra ignored the sting of the nails biting into her skin and put her hand over Cecilia’s. “Donna is dead, and I need to find out who killed her.”

“My Donna was kind to everyone she knew. That’s why she can’t be dead.”

She pried the woman’s fingers off her arm and took a step back. “I’ll come back when you feel better, Mrs. LaRoux.”

Kyra closed the door carefully and looked down the hall. Phil was in conversation with the doctor and didn’t look happy. The air in the hospital was so obsessively clean that she could barely smell her own soap. She hated that crisp non-smell smell. Most people didn’t

seem to notice it, but it bothered her. Everything should offer some sort of sensory input. Disgruntled, she looked toward the nursing station. A nurse was staring at her.

"Hi." Kyra walked over to the desk.

The nurse blushed and looked down. "Mrs. LaRoux is bad off."

"Yes." Kyra nodded.

"Looks like they are trying to find her a place at St. Martin's."

Great, an institution. "Did she say anything to you or any of the nurses?"

"No. She keeps asking when her daughter will be in. We gave up trying to explain ..."

"Yeah." She understood that well. "Has anyone been to visit her?"

"Just her stepson, William."

"Stepson?"

"Yeah, William LaRoux."

"Do you have contact information for him?" Kyra pulled out her p-pc and input his name and information as the nurse read it off Cecilia's chart. She glanced toward Phil as he came to a stop beside her. "Hey."

"Doc says she's loony city."

"I'm so glad I brought you down here, Phil. Look how you're already using that medical jargon."

Phil sighed. "You suck."

"You wish," Kyra muttered. "Let's go." She offered the nurse a smile. "Thank you."

Phil cast the nurse a glance and trotted along after Kyra. "How come you got the pretty nurse and I got the old doctor?"

"Cause your wife made me promise not to let you question women." Kyra pushed the lobby button for the elevator and looked briefly in his direction. "Donna has a stepbrother."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. The nurse said he's been up to visit the mother. I want him found and brought in for questioning. It's interesting that he hasn't contacted us for information about his sister."

William LaRoux looked like the average nineteen-year-old kid, with his blond hair shaved close to his head, battered jeans, and a red shirt that bore a standard epithet about society. Kyra supposed she agreed with him. The world did suck. Society in general was nowhere near the utopia most had imagined for the future. Still, with three civil wars behind them and a new ice age sweeping over the continent, the NAU had done pretty well. Now that the technology ban for nonessential avenues had been lifted, their world was changing very rapidly. Survival was no longer the main concern for most.

“William, why haven’t you contacted us concerning the death of your sister?” Kyra asked.

“Stepsister.”

She nodded and leaned back in her chair as she stared pointedly at him. “Why haven’t you called us, William?”

“I’ve been busy taking care of Cece. She’s in bad shape. I figured you’d contact me with any news.”

“Didn’t even know about you,” Kyra murmured. “Cecilia didn’t mention you. Donna only had one emergency contact on her employment file. Why didn’t she list you?”

“We didn’t get along.”

“Did your father adopt Donna?”

“Yeah, our parents got married when we were, like, fourteen.”

“Did you know Donna before she and her mother became part of your family?”

“We went to the same school.” William moved around in his chair and focused on the wall behind Kyra. “Look, Donna was a good girl. She didn’t hang out with the wrong kind of people, and got good grades.”

“Did Donna have a boyfriend?”

“No.”

“Why didn’t you get along?”

“We fought a lot after my dad died. She didn’t understand why I moved out and why I stopped coming over.”

“Why did you?”

“They weren’t my family anymore,” William snapped.

“Nice of you to look after Cecilia, then, considering.”

“It’s the decent thing to do. Donna was her whole world.”

“So, William, how long were you and Donna involved?”

“She was my sister.” His jaw was set firmly, but his eyes were shiny and unfocused. It had been a wild guess, but it had paid off.

“Your stepsister, as you corrected me just a few minutes ago. Look, William, we’ve already got evidence that Donna was sexually active. Tell me where you were the night she was killed.”

“I was upstate. I’d gone to see my grandparents.”

“You must have rushed home when Cecilia called.”

“Her doctor called me.”

“You aren’t on record for an emergency contact for Cecilia, either.”

“I guess she gave them the number.” He shrugged.

Kyra stood up and walked away from the table. "Look, kid, I don't think you killed Donna. But I need to verify a few facts before I can move on to other evidence and other suspects." She leaned against the wall and stared at him hard. "We recovered semen. You were sexually involved with your stepsister."

William flushed with anger. "They met through us, for fuck's sake. We'd been dating for months. All of a sudden, they say they're getting married and now we're brother and sister. Donna's mother forced her to accept the adoption." He slumped in the chair, deflated. "We tried to do what they wanted. But we liked each other so much."

"When did things get sexual?"

"About two years ago." William swallowed hard. "But it was consensual. We were going to get married; at least, we were going to try. We didn't know what the adoption would mean ... crap, it was a mess." William rubbed his face hard and sucked in a breath. "I should have been home. If I'd been home and gone up there to see her on her breaks like I always did ... she wouldn't have been alone."

Kyra didn't have anything to say about that; she didn't know what circumstances had made Donna a victim. "Donna had bruises on her neck."

William blushed with discomfort. "Yeah, one of her friends told her that it would be really good if she could get me to sort of choke her while we were having sex."

"Why weren't you on her emergency contact list?"

"I don't know."

"When is the last time you were intimate with Donna?"

"Like, Saturday." He shrugged.

"We'll confirm your alibi with your grandparents."

"Good. Look, I have nothing to hide. She was everything to me. I'd rather kill myself than hurt her." William lowered his gaze to the table.

"We'll need a DNA sample from you so we can eliminate any physical evidence that connects you to her."

"Yeah." He looked up to her. "Not a problem."

"Was Donna angry with you?"

"We fought occasionally, mostly about Cece and our having to hide our relationship. Donna wanted so much more than anyone else did."

"More of what?"

"Everything. I don't think she would've ever been satisfied. There was always some new thing to get or to have."

* * * * *

Kyra tossed the file on her desk and glared in Phil's general direction. "That's a crappy-ass thing to do to a couple of kids."

"Love happens." He shrugged.

"Love sucks."

"Yeah, that, too." Phil stood up and stretched. "What are you after next?"

"I'm going to go check on Capshaw in lockup."

He snickered. "I heard he was crying earlier."

That shouldn't have amused her, but it did. "Figure I'll let him go once the judge has the restraining order in place."

"No way. He hits a cop, he has to own up to it. The judge will fine him and let him go."

"I let him hit me."

"He shouldn't have even tried," he countered. "It's a mistake he should pay for. Man, where's my bitch-cop partner?"

"She's tired." Kyra stretched and motioned him off. "Go."

* * * * *

She took the elevator down to holding. If she'd taken the stairs, everything would have been all right. The doors opened, and two-hundred-plus pounds of man came barreling in toward her. Since she had nowhere to run, her only choice was to fight. As he entered the elevator, she shoved her foot into his crotch and kned him in the face when he doubled over. He fell out on his back, groaning and bleeding from the mouth.

"Who let this asshole loose?"

"Inspector Moray." A uniformed officer came running and jerked his charge up off the floor. "My apologies; he got away from us."

"Get him in leg restraints, Constable," Kyra called out over her shoulder. She walked to the desk sergeant's station and sighed. "Sergeant Marseau!"

Portly and sloppily dressed, Sergeant Marseau appeared immediately in the doorway of a break room just off his desk. "Inspector Moray."

"We've got a prisoner rushing the elevator, and an empty watch desk. You know what that makes me?"

"Mad," Sergeant Marseau murmured, miserable.

"Yeah. Where's my prisoner?"

"That guy that belted you?" Marseau smirked.

"Yeah."

"He's in four."

Kyra glared at him and then walked toward holding. "Next time I damn near get run over by an out-of-control prisoner, I'm having your badge for breakfast."

Ignoring a few indecent proposals and assorted kissing noises, she strolled down to holding cell four and looked at Jerry. He was alone in his cell and finishing off what looked to be a steak dinner. "Hello, Jerry."

Jerry glared at her. "You can't hold me like this."

"It isn't my fault you can't make bail. The DA should have you up before a judge tomorrow afternoon. Lucky for you -- your record is clean. You'll probably just get a fine."

"Yeah."

"You'll leave Glory alone. She had all of your belongings delivered to your mother's house." Kyra grinned. "She said to tell you that if you weren't there in three days to pick it up, she was going to sell it all online."

"Glory and me is none of your business."

"There is no Glory and you. While you're in court tomorrow, a restraining order will be issued, barring you from contacting Glory. You'll pay attention to that restraining order, or things will get very ugly for you. The chief of police takes stalking very seriously."

"We're getting married," Jerry snapped.

Kyra snorted. "Not likely. Do you think Glory's stupid? She's seen you for what you are, and you won't get back in her good graces. Her daddy was the sort of man who would drink too much and then hit his wife. You think Glory's going to let a man in her life who would hit a woman?"

"You set me up," Jerry seethed.

"Glory's trust fund is locked up good and tight, Jerry. Even if you had married her, you wouldn't have seen a cent. She's got half of it invested in her salon, and the rest won't be hers until she's thirty-five." Kyra tapped the bars gently and then started to walk away from him. "Cute, fun, and innocent ... but she's not stupid."

"Cunt."

"Dickless wonder." Kyra walked away, talking over her shoulder. "Women talk, Jerry. I doubt there's a woman in a forty-mile radius that hasn't been told what a teeny-tiny dick you have."

"Yo, Inspector Moray."

Kyra turned and peered into another cell as she reached for the door to leave. "Willie. What'd they get you for?"

"Drunk and disorderly." Wilfred Barnes blushed to the roots of the few hairs he had left and leaned back from the bars a little. "Saw something; got good juice to share."

"Judge seen you yet?"

"Nah."

"Did you hurt anybody during your drunk and disorderly?"

"Nope, just sitting on a park bench minding my own ..." He grinned, showing more gum than teeth.

"I'll be back around for you. Better be really good juice."

He paused, then frowned. "They say he hit you." He jerked his head toward Jerry's cell.

"He hit a cop."

"My bet is he hit you." Willie frowned harder. "Ought not hit a woman, cop or no. Maybe he should pay for it."

"He'll get a big fine from the judge."

Kyra made quick work of finding the arresting officer for Willie's picnic in the park and getting the charges set aside. Feeling charitable, she let Willie get a meal in him before she had him brought up to an interview room.

"Heard the boys down in holding are treating Jerry a little better than most."

Kyra snorted and looked through the privacy screen to the room Willie had been brought into. "The jackass was finishing a T-bone when I swung by to chat with him."

"Not every day we come across a man stupid enough to take a swing at you." Phil grinned, holding up his hands in mock surrender when she turned to stare at him.

Kyra sighed. "Let's go see what Willie knows."

"You were quick to get him sprung."

She glanced once more at Willie and nodded. Wilfred Barnes was one of the smartest men she knew, and no matter how many times she told herself that he'd let go of society and wouldn't return, she kept hoping she could eventually pull him off the streets. He was a big man, at least three hundred pounds and just under seven feet. They didn't call him Big Willie on the streets for nothing, she supposed. Still, despite his living conditions, he didn't look underfed, and his complexion had a ruddy glow of health. It made her furious that she couldn't make him do what she wanted.

"Willie's never given me bad information. That counts in my book, even if he is fond of liquor."

Willie was hovering in the far corner of the room when Kyra entered. Frowning, she sat down at the table and waited for Willie to sit. She'd never known him to be intimidated by her before. "What's up, Willie?"

"Just want to talk to you." He looked briefly at Phil and then the chair he was supposed to be sitting in. "Just you."

"Okay, then." Kyra glanced at Phil, who nodded and left the room quietly.

Willie shook his head and looked toward the screen. "He's behind there, watching. Don't like it."

Kyra frowned, then looked toward the screen. "It's okay, Phil. I'll catch up with you in the field."

Willie was still for another minute and moved to the chair to sit down. "Don't like ya having a partner."

Kyra didn't say anything for a moment. When he was settled in the chair, she cleared her throat. "Okay, Willie, what's up?"

"Something bad on the streets, just not right. Need you to get me a bed for a few weeks. Maybe one of those halfway houses or a treatment program."

Kyra stilled for a moment. "A treatment program?" She'd spent nearly three years trying to get him into an addiction program. "What's got you running?"

"Something bad came out of the water. He's just not right, got no soul."

"Out of the water?" Kyra frowned. "Come on, Willie. What did you see?"

"The bayou ain't like no place on earth. People go in there and never come out. Sometimes, nobody goes in there and somebody come out. He wasn't here before; he came from the water. Vicious, mean thing. Cut the girl; didn't see it. Know he did it, though."

"Willie, you know I don't believe in such things."

"Don't gotta believe; just gotta see." Willie reached out and grabbed her hand. She noticed immediately his hand was shaking badly. "Come out of the water. Cut that poor girl. It was her soul that he wanted. Sure as I'm sittin' here. Didn't want her; she wasn't important."

"Are you talking about Donna LaRoux?"

"Sweet girl at the diner. She used to give me coffee out the back door when Noel wasn't lookin'." Willie tightened his fingers around her hand. "He took what was important. Left you a message, didn't he?"

She didn't answer. Kyra had known Willie since she'd been a beat cop. There had never been a time when he'd seemed so upset. "I'll get you a bed at the Smythe House. Don't know how long they'll be able to keep you -- probably longer if you agree to take the classes and not drink."

Willie nodded quickly. "That'll do. That'll do."

"Did you see a vehicle?"

"Dark blue van, shiny wheels, the kind with the puncture-proofing. Must drive on a lot of unpaved roads to pay that much for pricey tires."

"What about the driver? What can you tell me about him?"

"Tall; not as tall as me." He grinned then and lowered his gaze to the table when she didn't smile back. "Couldn't tell race -- he had his face and hands covered. He's young, though. Young and fit."

Kyra stood. She knew she wouldn't get much more out of him. "I'll get you that bed now."

"Want to wait in my cell." Willie stood. "Ain't safe. Just ain't, otherwise. You'll take me over to the house?"

Kyra nodded. "Yeah, Willie, I will." She paused at the door. "You won't have to go anywhere. You can stay here until I'm ready to ride. You know you can trust my partner."

"Don't know about him."

Kyra propped her feet up on her desk. "You scared Professor Willie."

"Professor Willie?" Phil's eyes got wide with surprise. "He's the size of an oak tree."

"Yeah." Kyra grimaced. "You know, he taught law back east somewhere for years before his family was killed. Some asshole broke into his home and killed his wife, children, and one grandchild while he was teaching a night class. The case was never solved. They say he lost his mind. He drank his way south until he hit New Orleans and has been here for eleven years."

"Why was he in holding?"

"Beat cops normally make sure to keep him out of harm's way; brought him in last night because it was supposed to rain." Kyra looked at Phil. "You know, there are some people you just can't give up on. There isn't a cop in this city that hasn't gone out of their way for Willie Barnes, except maybe you. You're too new for it. Give him a while to get used to you."

"Did he give you any information?"

Kyra frowned; she was still puzzling over that. "Normally he's pretty straightforward about information. He's scared, Phil. Willie actually asked for a bed in a halfway house. It's like pulling teeth with him to get him to admit he needs help. He kept talking about the bayou and a man coming out of the water." She stood. "I want to go down to the Smythe House and get him a room for a few weeks. I need you to bring the stepbrother back in. Prepare him; he might have to view the body."

* * * * *

Kyra entered the Smythe House with a smile for the owner and operator. Neal Valteau smiled back and started shaking his head.

"Whatever it is, no."

"Come on, Neal. Do I need to go see your daddy and tell him you were mean to me?"

She smiled and watched a blush steal across his cheeks. Neal was attractive in a neat and orderly sort of way. His slacks were always pressed, his tie always in place. His dark

brown hair was cut short and styled. She supposed that if she hadn't liked her men a little on the rough side, she might have gone for him.

Neal sighed. "I really can't thank you enough for being there for him the other night. He takes those girls that work for him to heart, almost like family. I don't know how he's managing to hold it together."

Kyra sat down in a chair as Neal sat down behind his desk. "He's a good man, runs a good place. I eat there more than I should."

"What do you need, Kyra?"

"Professor Willie is outside."

Neal raised an eyebrow. "Come on, Kyra, don't tease me. I've been trying to get ahold of that old man for four years now."

"He's out in my vehicle, sitting as meek as a newborn babe, and I want to put him up here indefinitely."

"He hurt or sick?" Neal asked softly.

"He's always been hurt," Kyra returned, sighing. "He's scared. That murder at your daddy's place has him all twisted up. He's saying the bayou coughed up a monster. He says the streets aren't safe."

"Streets haven't ever been safe, but no one messes with Professor Willie."

"Still, he's scared. I'm afraid he'll do something to get himself put in jail for real; that's how scared he appears to be." Kyra met Neal's gaze. "I need to know you'll make every effort to keep him here."

"No worries on that front." Neal stood. "I got a room with its own bathroom open. We had to move the last tenant to a state facility just this morning."

"I know that most of the men who stay here work their way ..." She reddened with embarrassment. "I'm willing to make sure that his being here isn't a financial hardship for the house."

"It won't be. I get that man sober and focused, he could do a lot of good around this place. I'll keep him as long as I can. Still, if he's as scared as you make out, I doubt I'll have any problems."

Kyra hovered in the doorway of her commander's office for a half-minute before she cleared her throat. "Say, you got time for a conversation?"

He motioned her to come in and looked up as she closed the door. "What's up?"

"When are we going to discuss why Phil was assigned to me?"

"Looks like right now," he muttered.

Kyra sat down and waited. When he'd asked her to take Phil as a partner, she hadn't hesitated. She respected her commander enough to know that he wouldn't have asked if it

wasn't important. Ethan Baker was a man who never said anything without thinking it through. Whatever he had to tell her about Phil didn't appear to be an easy thing for him. She knew Phil had come in from Lafayette, and that his record had a seal on it.

"Two months after he earned his sergeant's shield, things got twisted up with his partner. His partner was on the take. No one knew either way about Phil. They couldn't prove he was, but no one in his precinct thought he was clean except his captain. Me and his old captain go back a ways; I agreed to take Phil on. I gave him to you, because I knew if he was dirty, you'd find out."

Kyra nodded. "I see."

"Have you found out?"

"No. I don't think he's dirty. He doesn't have the grit for it. Not sure if he would follow a bad cop, though. Did he testify against his partner?"

"His ex-partner ate his gun just before the investigation was to go public. It was a mess, not something the boys in Lafayette like to talk about." Ethan looked over Kyra's face, shook his head at the bruise. "What's going on?"

"I snagged Professor Willie out of holding because he had some information."

"I heard."

"Willie refused to talk to me while Phil was in the room. Willie's a good people-person, an excellent judge. He's afraid of Phil."

"Interesting. How did Phil react?"

"He shrugged it off." Kyra looked at her comm-u and stood. "I have Donna LaRoux's brother in for another interview. I'll be submitting a report this evening before I hit the road."

"It can wait until the morning. Go home after your interview with the kid."

"What do you mean you can't find him?" Kyra grimaced, aware of her tone. "Sorry."

Phil shrugged. "No big deal. He's not at work or his apartment." He sat down in a chair next to Kyra's desk. "My feeling is that he's blowing off some steam with a few friends. Can't be easy for him."

"Yeah." Kyra nodded. "I have a few calls to make ... you want to go down and see if you can nudge Parker on Donna's final?"

"Sounds good."

Kyra waited until he closed the door, and then she slowly lowered her head to her desk. It seemed the world was out to thwart her. Grimly, she pulled out a directory to find the comm-number for the costume shop where her grandmother had picked out her costume for the masquerade ball. Called Masks of All Trades, they promised the unique. It was the "unique" that worried Kyra.

“Good afternoon, this is Kyra Moray. My grandmother made costume reservations for me. I was wondering if you could tell me what she chose and what size it is.”

Chapter Three

Kyra shouldered her bag and propped her groceries on her hip as she unlocked the door. With more bravery than agility, she stepped over the package that was now across her threshold and took her groceries into the kitchen. The long box, obviously from a floral shop, was something of a surprise. She hadn't dated in a while, so there was no man trying to get back in her good graces. She picked it up and shut her door with one foot.

A simple red bow was tied around the box. She pulled it and dismissed it as it fell to the floor. Inside the box, she found a blood-red rose and an envelope. Curiosity piqued, she laid the rose and box on the counter in the kitchen and opened the card.

Length: 9.5 inches

Circumference: 5.16 inches

References Available upon request

Laughing, she put the card aside and found a small vase under the sink for the rose. Amused by his gift and his card, she took the rose and vase to her bedroom. The rose had *almost* erased her displeasure. She'd spent twenty minutes on the comm-u with the costume shop before she'd successfully changed the size. She hadn't been a size eight in nearly ten years. Her grandmother never ceased to amaze her. Since her grandmother was a ditz, Kyra didn't consider the costume or the sizing some sort of emotional warfare. It was just who her grandmother was.

No wig, no corset, and a dress that was a size ten, thank everyone very much, was in Kyra's future, and she was grateful. She wasn't exactly pleased to be going in pink, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Anyway, maybe she'd get wounded in the line of duty before

the damn ball happened. Horrified at her mental wanderings, she crossed herself and sent God a small prayer hoping He'd forget her stupidity.

Nine and half inches? She dropped back on her bed and looked at the rose. She was going to see him Friday night, but it wouldn't hurt to swing by Still Waters tonight, would it? Kyra sat up, ran her fingers through her hair, and hopped off the bed. With a sigh, she went into the bathroom and pulled out the nanobot activation kit. Pulling out an injection unit, she pressed it against her skin and jumped just a little when the compressed air shot the activation-bot into her bloodstream.

Kyra glanced briefly at her reflection in the mirror as she put the injection unit down. The bruising was much worse than she'd thought, mostly, she supposed, because of the second hit she'd taken. Otherwise, she looked good, which she could blame on her grandmother and the four years spent on the pageant circuit. The permanent enhancements to her face and eyes made beauty chemicals unnecessary. Though her skin was slightly pale from lack of sleep, her lips were a nice lush pink; cheeks were highlighted expertly with a soft, barely detectable blush. Her dark green eyes were gently outlined with a soft brown tattooed eyeliner that accentuated their shape and size. Her lashes were naturally thick and dark.

She touched the bruise once and sighed. Intellectually, she knew that she couldn't feel the nanobots as they activated and started to move around her body to repair minor damage to her cells. However, on some deeper level the knowledge that the invisible little bots were running around inside her body, beyond her control, made her itch. She made a quick run through the kitchen to put away the perishables, and left.

Out of her apartment building, she made herself stroll leisurely down the street to the bar. It wouldn't do to be out of breath when she got there. The man at the door gave her an abrupt nod as she walked across the street. With a little flourish, he opened the door and shooed her in out of the night.

Jazz and beer were flowing nicely for a Wednesday night. She found an empty stool and slid up onto it.

"I bet you're the cop."

Kyra turned and offered the man who'd spoken a smile. He had neat and orderly braids falling over dark, angelic features, and he looked like pure sin. "I am a cop. Who are you?"

"Marcus Waters." He offered her his hand and smiled when she took it. "You got a look, that's for sure." He focused on the bruise over her jawbone. "Who won the fight?"

"I always win the fights," Kyra murmured, pulling her hand from his as Alex moved down the bar and set a glass of water in front of her. For a couple of seconds, she just stared; there was something so alluring about him that it made her apprehensive. Men like him didn't fit into neat little pockets, and that's all she had room for in her life. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself. Catch any bad guys today?"

“Not today.” She plucked a straw out of his pocket and stripped it as she frowned. “Say, you know Professor Willie?”

“Yeah, he’s an institution around these parts. He usually comes around on nights like this, but one is his limit here.” Alex leaned on the bar. “Something happen to him?”

“He got jailed last night for D & D. Not unusual for him, especially since it was supposed to rain.” She shrugged. “Except, today when I was talking with him, he made it clear he didn’t want to go back on the streets. You hear anything?”

Alex shook his head. “Nope. Not many people mess with a big boy like him.”

“Yeah.” She swished her straw through her water and looked around the bar before settling her gaze on his brother. “I have your last CD.”

Marcus smiled. “See, I told ya I’d find the lady who bought it.”

She rolled her eyes. The album in question had gone platinum; she knew she wasn’t the only one to buy it. “My grandmother told me I shouldn’t keep sex music out in the living room with the rest of my music. She hid it the drawer of my nightstand.”

Alex shook his head and laughed as a customer got his attention. “He always was the one.”

Kyra watched him move down the bar, her gaze traveling over the startlingly nice view she had of his ass, and then looked at Marcus. “So, why are you retiring?”

“At the moment, I’m tired of the travel.” He looked at his brother and then back at her. “I’ve never known him to be interested in a cop.” Marcus looked her over and grinned. “But then, I’ve never seen a cop like you.”

“Sure you have. Don’t you watch the vid-panel?”

“Not enough, apparently.” He pushed aside his drink. “Want to make him mad?”

Kyra shook her head. “No, not yet. He hasn’t done anything to warrant it.”

Marcus slipped off the stool. “I guess I’ll go find some lonely young lady to dance with, then.”

She shook her head as he disappeared into the crowd and Alex appeared back in front of her. “Your brother is an interesting man.”

“Yeah.” He met her gaze. “You look tired, Inspector.”

“Long day.” Kyra looked down at the bar and frowned. “Crap. I should have made him stay seated.”

Alex laughed as one of his regulars strolled down the length of the bar and slipped up onto the stool next her. “Need a refill, Ken?”

“Nope, thought I’d buy the lady a drink.”

“The lady doesn’t drink.” Kyra cast a glance in his direction and then pushed aside her water. With a small smile for Alex, she shrugged out of her jacket and let it fall on the backrest of the stool. The light gleamed on the steel of the weapon she had strapped on.

Ken raised an eyebrow. "Got restraints?"

"Get lost, before you make her mad." Alex motioned him away and looked around the bar. "Where did my brother go?"

"Off to seduce some unsuspecting woman." She slid off the stool. "You got an office?"

"Yeah." He signaled to one of the bartenders at the other end of the bar and then motioned her around. "Meet me on the end."

Kyra followed Alex Waters into his office, wondering what she thought she was doing in the middle of a crowded bar on a Wednesday night. She leaned against the door as she shut it, and sucked in a breath as he reached past her to flick the lock. It had been easier to ignore how attracted she was to him when other people had surrounded them.

Sucking her bottom lip into her mouth, Kyra took the time to consider what she was doing and what it would accomplish. Did she really have time to get involved with a man? The answer was no, of course; she barely had time to pay the rent on her apartment, much less get involved with a man like Alexander Waters. He was a complication, and he was already there, in her mind, teasing her with images of the incredible sex they were certainly going to have.

"Inspector, are you still on duty?"

"Umm ... no." She met his gaze as he rested one hand above her head. "I got your note."

"I'm glad." He ran his finger along the line of her jaw, then rubbed her mouth gently with his thumb. "Did you want those references?"

"Only if you want assorted lovers from your past brought in on trumped-up criminal charges." Kyra sucked in a deep breath as he moved closer.

"Jealous already, Kyra?"

"Territorial. It's my nature." She made no apologies for it; she had a feeling he was the same way. Kyra tossed the light jacket in a small chair to her left and let her hands run along his sides. "How did you find out where I lived?"

"I'm a business owner in this neighborhood. It's advantageous to know where the cops live. Had I known you looked like this, I would have sought your assistance a long time ago. You are much nicer on the eyes than Sergeant Calhoun." He took in a deep, audible breath as her fingers ran along his belt.

Kyra slipped her fingers into the front of his jeans and pulled a little. "My friend Glory thinks you're sexy."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah." Kyra wet her bottom lip.

"What do you think?"

"I think," she whispered with a smile, "that you look good enough to eat."

She grinned, and showed him her teeth in the process.

Alex met her gaze. "I tend to be demanding, Kyra. A woman in my bed doesn't keep secrets, doesn't play games, and isn't afraid to tell me exactly what she needs."

"The only secrets I have are professional."

His hands smoothed over the straps of her shoulder holster. "Those kinds of secrets are acceptable."

"I'm fairly demanding myself."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. If I'm in a man's bed, no other woman is. This wouldn't be negotiable, and failure to adhere to this rule would terminate all relations, with no discussions." Her gaze drifted over his mouth before she met his eyes. "It's my dick until I'm done with it."

"That's a pretty hefty stipulation for this situation. You barely know me."

"Those are my rules, *if* I decide to have a sexual relationship with you."

"Really, Inspector, I think you've already made that choice."

She shrugged. "It may have to be re-evaluated. You look amazing, but there are lots of pretty things around that prove to be useless."

He laughed. "Any other conditions or rules?"

"My job is dangerous, and I'm not giving it up for any man. I don't need a man to keep me, protect me, or manage me."

"What *do* you need a man for?"

She pulled him closer, curling her fingers deeper into the front of his jeans at the same time. "To fuck me, respect me, and occasionally I might need a shoulder to cry on."

"I think we understand each other's terms."

Kyra nodded and sighed when his body was flush against hers. She slipped one leg around his and ran both hands up his chest. Their mouths met in a furious crush. She shuddered and groaned against the swift invasion of his tongue. He lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist with no hesitation. He pressed his cock against the heat of her and groaned when she held him tighter.

Alex pulled his mouth from hers, moving his lips along her jaw and placing a very soft kiss on her neck. "You are such a temptation."

"I'm trying." Frustration made her voice a little more breathless than she would have preferred. She couldn't remember ever being this hot and willing for a man.

He laughed. "Yeah." Lowering his head to her shoulder, he gently set her on her feet and took a deep breath. "I don't get personal like this, not in my place."

Kyra sighed, disappointed but understanding. She appreciated personal codes of behavior better than most. "I get that." She turned her face and kissed his jaw. "Let's have lunch tomorrow."

“A real lunch, or a flat surface for an hour?”

Laughing, she ran one hand down his chest to his belt buckle. “A real lunch, maybe.”

“Food is always good.” He pulled her closer to him, away from the door, and ran his fingers through her hair. “You have a great voice, Inspector -- soft and deep like really good sex.”

Kyra closed her eyes briefly as he brushed his lips over hers before releasing her. “I’ll swing by tomorrow when I have an hour free.”

“Sounds good.”

Kyra exited Still Waters with a smile on her face and soaking wet panties. It was, she thought, a shame that Alex hadn’t been tempted enough. She looked around the entrance of the bar and wondered where the doorman was. He was something of an institution himself on St. Anne Street. He worked Wednesday through Saturday nights and was just the sort of formidable presence a woman could appreciate standing on her street.

Turning around, she walked back into the building and looked toward the bar. Alex was there, looking grim, with a bartender, the doorman, and a man she was sure had no business being behind the bar. Disgruntled, she went back to the bar and slipped up onto the stool.

Looking toward Alex, she smiled. “The usual.”

He nodded abruptly and went down the bar to pour her a drink. When he came back with red wine, she knew there was trouble. Taking the wine, she slid off the barstool and moved into the crowd. She found his brother on the dance floor. Setting down the wine, she walked to him and cut into his dance.

The young woman he was dancing with gave her a practiced glare and flounced off. Kyra gave him an apologetic smile as he offered his hand. “Sorry about that.”

He shook his head as he pulled her close and slid his hand down to press against the small of her back. “It was a timely rescue. You look tense.”

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat; there was something about the Waters men that made her stupid. “Look toward the bar. Who’s the man behind it with Alex and the bartender?”

Marcus stiffened immediately and started to move. Kyra held on to him tight. “No. Don’t make a snap decision. Is he a stranger, or something worse?”

“Worse. He’s an old friend of Alex’s. His name is John Deets; they were in the military together. Alex is always so trusting.”

“Is he dangerous?”

“I’ve always thought so.”

“I ordered ‘my usual,’ and he gave me a glass of wine.” Kyra looked back to the bar and nodded. “I think it’s time I order again.” Reaching under her jacket, she unbuckled the strap

that kept her gun in the holster, and left Marcus on the dance floor, knowing he'd follow along behind her.

She stopped at the bar, but didn't sit down. "So, gentlemen, are we playing a game? None of you have moved in the three minutes since I left the bar." John Deets angled her way, and she saw the gun. It was, she thought, just the way she wanted to end the evening. Nodding, she smiled. "Nice. That's a late-edition EPG Ranger?"

"Yeah." Deets glared at her. "I'm collecting on a debt. Mind your own business, bitch."

She pulled her own weapon and aimed at the middle of his forehead. "That's 'bitch cop' to you." Everyone at the bar scrambled away, and Kyra smiled. "I prefer the EPG8000. It's an elegant weapon, don't you think? Nice, sleek lines, and it has enough power that I could put a bullet in your head from a mile away. Granted, we aren't a mile apart. So, I can imagine the damage might be significant.

"Right now, John, this is business between you and Alex. You can leave and never come back. We'll all pretend like this didn't happen, if that's what he wants. If you turn and point that gun at me, I'm going to put a bullet in your head, and then it won't be between just you and Alex."

He seemed to consider his options, his gaze darting between Alex and Kyra. "I'll go." He looked toward Alex as the music onstage came to a halt. "But we aren't done."

"That wasn't what I said." Kyra thumbed the laser sight on her gun, and a bright blue dot appeared in the middle of John's forehead. "You should learn to pay attention."

Marcus Waters whistled. "I'd take her seriously if I were you, John."

"Put the gun on the bar and leave."

"I'm not leaving my gun ..." He paused and considered. Her eyes were hard and serious. "You sure are a bitch cop."

"Talking sweet to me like that isn't going to help you."

He put the gun down on the bar with a shaking hand and took a couple steps back from the bar. Reaching out, she grabbed the gun and lowered hers. She cast one glance at him and then flipped open the ammunition chamber. He was fortunate that it held the standard personal defense gel pellets and not bullets. "Now, since you two are on equal footing, I'll be leaving."

She didn't look back when glass broke. Out in the street, she strolled toward her apartment and wondered what John Deets thought Alex owed him.

* * * * *

Alex dropped a gel pack on John's face and sat down. The bar had emptied quickly; most of the crew was working on cleaning up his mess. He sighed and shared a knowing look with Marcus.

"You know, John, you picked the wrong night to come in here and mess with me."

John laughed roughly. "Fuck you. Who was she, anyway?"

"His cop," Marcus murmured. "You are lucky she isn't a trigger-happy bitch cop."

John winced. "Man, I'm going to get hassled for sure."

"Kyra isn't that kind of cop." Alex crossed his arms across his chest. "This settled between us?"

"Bastard." John muttered. "A man has a right to want to fuck with you for what you did."

"You and I both know that Frank made the mistake. I can't believe you're still dragging this stuff around. We've been out for three years."

"Fuck that. My best friend is dead."

Alex raised an eyebrow. He knew that Frank and John had been lovers. It was something the unit had simply chosen to ignore. "The mistake was his, and he paid for it, unfortunately with his life. You carry that guilt around too long, it'll mess you up." Alex thought it probably had already. "You need to stop drinking. You could have killed someone tonight."

"Didn't have real bullets," John muttered. "Think you can get my gun back from your cop?"

Alex had to laugh. "No."

Marcus stood. "Your cab is here." He helped John stand. "Don't come back here, John. Else, I just might tell his cop I consider you a public menace. Maybe she'll find a reason to lock you up."

Alex watched silently as Marcus got rid of a man who used to be a friend, and wondered if he'd ever get past the night that had changed them all. John Deets had been forced out of military service. Alex had gotten out clean and without malice, but he harbored guilt for the night that had seen one of the men under his command die. He just had to remind himself that he'd done all he could.

He sat up straighter as Marcus came back. "Every time I see him, he looks a little less *here*."

Marcus nodded and sat down. "Your cop ..." He laughed. "You'll have your hands full with that one. I almost envy you."

Alex stood. "Can you close up?"

Marcus had to grin. "Only because I like her."

Alex leaned against the wall while he listened to Kyra approach her door.

She opened it swiftly and looked him over. "You look none the worse for wear."

"Yeah. I'll live."

Kyra stepped back and motioned him inside. "Come in."

Alex paused in her foyer as she locked the door. John's gun was lying on the table near the entrance, along with the jacket she'd been wearing. "I wanted to thank you. He's a good man; there are just a few issues between us."

"He looked shell-shocked," Kyra murmured.

"Close. His discharge was for mental reasons." Alex watched her moving around and wondered what she had on underneath the blue silk robe. "That's the first time he's ever brought a gun into the bar. He really isn't dangerous."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"What sort of debt do you owe him?"

"He thinks I'm responsible for the death of a friend."

"Are you?"

"I feel responsible, but I was cleared along with a couple other guys. I don't want to talk about it, Kyra."

She nodded. She saw the guilt, and wondered how she'd missed the small details that marked him as ex-military. His posture, the way he moved, and the way his eyes scanned his surroundings screamed training of some kind. Sitting down on the couch, she watched him sit in a chair across from her and almost smiled.

"At least I got to use my new laser sight."

Alex laughed and then shook his head. "I thought for sure he was going to faint. God, you know, I tried to stay angry with him. He brought a gun into my place. He had it pointed at Jake, the bartender, and all I could think was that I'd trusted him with my life once."

"Are you going to make sure he gets the help he needs?"

"Yeah, I'll make a few calls tomorrow. They should have kept him, made sure he was ready for a life on the outside before cutting him loose. Unfortunately, a lot of times it's just easier to cut a guy loose than deal with him."

"You aren't pissy that I interfered?" Kyra raised an eyebrow and watched him move around in the chair.

"I'm a grown man, not some seventeen-year-old kid who isn't sure his dick's big enough for the real world." He focused on her legs briefly and then met her gaze. "If you hadn't interfered, I might have had to seriously hurt him. Despite his actions, I still consider him a friend. I would have regretted hurting him."

She crossed her legs at the knee and her robe slid open. "So, you came over to apologize for your friend?"

"No, I came over to find a hot, wet place for my cock. I thought you might have one."

Kyra wet her bottom lip and uncrossed her legs. "I might."

He stood and walked to her, but before she could stand, he lowered himself to his knees in front of her. Running dark, work-roughened hands over her thighs, he spread her legs.

“Come here.”

She scooted forward, breathless, as he untied her robe and pushed it out of his way. “I have a bed.”

“We’ll get there,” Alex promised as his hands clamped onto her hips to hold her.

Lowering his head, he kissed the inside of her left thigh and glanced up at her soft intake of breath. Her head fell back, and her hands twisted in the silk fabric of her robe. Impatient for the taste of her, he moved in and slipped his tongue between the folds of her sex. She jerked in his hands, a soft moan slipping from her mouth.

“Alex.”

“I know.” He stood. There wasn’t going to be enough patience for a lot of play.

Kyra took the hand he offered and let him pull her up from the couch. Knowing what was laying on her bed, she wondered what he’d have to say about it. Since she much preferred what he was offering to the clit stimulator she’d chosen from her toy box, she hoped he wouldn’t be put off.

Light from the street lit the bedroom just enough for the bed to be visible. The silver bullet vibrator was a shiny little beacon in the bedding. She saw him shake his head before pulling off his shirt.

Reaching for his belt, he met her gaze. “I see you started without me.”

She smiled, then pushed her robe off her shoulders and onto the floor. “A woman has to be prepared to take care of her own needs.”

“Oh, I agree.” He looked her over in the dim light and sat down on the edge of the bed. Barely letting his gaze leave her, he quickly unlaced his boots and tossed them aside. “I can appreciate a woman who’s prepared.”

Kyra moved toward him as he stood, and unbuttoned his jeans for him. Her pale fingers slipped over the dark skin of his belly, loving the firm muscles she found there. “Speaking of prepared, I have a tester.”

“Tell me it’ll be quick.”

She laughed and went to her nightstand. Pulling out a small computerized device, she slipped two fingers into the testing chamber and didn’t even wince when it took blood. The machine hummed and the light on top of it glowed a bright green. She handed it to him silently and watched as he did the same.

“You don’t find it insulting?”

He laughed and handed it to her when it flashed green. “No. It’s smart. My contraceptive shots are current.”

“Mine, too.”

He shucked his jeans and boxers.

Kyra sucked in a breath as she allowed her gaze to drop down to his cock. He hadn't been lying. She watched him as he sat down on the bed, and took his hand when he held it out for her. He pulled her gently astride his thighs and ran his hands down her back as she settled.

Her hands immediately latched onto his cock, stroking the satiny flesh she found there and wondering why he'd slowed down. He pulled her closer and took her mouth with his. Sucked in by the kiss, Kyra started to tremble. She wrapped her arms around him and held on. When he stood and lowered her to the bed on her back, she groaned with approval. She could barely wait to have him inside her.

Kyra drew her knees up to cradle Alex, running her hands over his shoulders as he lowered his mouth to one breast. His tongue and lips played there gently until her nipple ached. It had been a long time since she'd known a man so intense. She shivered as his cock brushed against her thigh. The sight of him moving between her legs, his dark skin so different than hers, was probably the most visually arousing thing she'd ever seen.

“You're teasing me.”

He raised his head and shook it. “I don't tease.”

She touched his face and rubbed her thumb over his lips. “Is this the part where I tell you what I need?”

“Not yet.” He sucked her thumb into his mouth and bit gently before releasing it.

Carefully, he spread her legs and lowered his mouth to the smooth plane of her stomach. He kissed her there, softly. She moved under his hands, shaking with want and something else. The intimacy he was creating wasn't what she had expected. It made her think about what she'd thought they would have. Had she really wanted him to fuck her blind and roll away to dress? She couldn't imagine that now as his mouth trailed across her hipbone.

“Alex.” His name was breathy on her lips as he lowered his mouth to the warm, fragrant flesh of her sex.

His tongue brushed against her clit as he spread her labia with gentle fingers, and she rushed wet against his mouth. Her hands moved over hard-tipped breasts, and she fought to stay still.

“Now,” she demanded.

He lifted his head and looked met her gaze. “Tell me.”

Her eyes glittered with arousal. She ran her hands over her thighs and spread her legs deeply for him. “Put your cock in me.”

He leaned in and kissed her lips gently, giving her a taste of her own arousal, before he began to press into her. She groaned delicately and lifted her hips. Penetrating her in one slow thrust, Alex pressed another tender kiss on her mouth. "Tell me when it's too much."

"No such thing," Kyra whispered as she slipped her hands over his shoulders and cupped the back of his head. "More."

He sucked in a breath between clenched teeth. "It's been a while since I've been with a woman who could take all of me."

"I'll take you," she promised. "Give it to me."

Alex groaned as she wrapped her legs around his hips. The silky pull of her flesh was amazing and more than he'd thought possible. He pushed deeper, then stilled as her hands moved over his back and her mouth moved under his. Slowly, he pulled from the wet heat of her body and then thrust deep. Her body clenched under his, and she shuddered.

"Good?" he breathed against her lips.

"Oh, yes." Kyra ran her hand along his jaw. "Is this what you came here looking for?"

"Hot and wet." He nibbled at her lip gently. "A man couldn't ask for more."

She closed her eyes as he thrust lazily into her again; orgasm was just beyond her reach. "I need more."

"Tell me."

"Faster, harder." She wrapped her hands around two bars in the headboard of the iron bed and gripped them tightly. "Fuck me."

Alex slipped his hands under her ass, quickening the thrust of his cock. She responded immediately with a litany of praise. Her softly spoken words, broken moans, and white-knuckled grip on the bed railings quickly pushed him past civilized. The bed creaked under the weight and movement of their bodies. She met each thrust with a lift of her hips, tightening her legs around him.

Slowly, he eased out of her. "Get on your knees, Kyra."

She took a deep breath. Rolling to her knees, she moved toward the front of the bed and wrapped her hands around the top part of the headboard. Kyra closed her eyes as his hands moved over her hips. He tilted her hips forward slightly and thrust back into her. Full, she sucked in a deep breath as he pushed deep and hard into her, his balls slapping repeatedly against her labia and throbbing clit.

Invaded, Kyra rocked back against him and shivered as he continued to thrust into her lazily. It was so hot and arousing, it almost hurt. Tightening her grip on the headboard, she pushed back against him and stiffened when he slipped his hand around and slid two fingers down to play with her clit. The circular movement on her clit soon matched the easy stroke of his cock.

Orgasm rushed forward, and she surrendered to the first wave with a small whimper. Her eyes dampened and she went still for just a few seconds. The sweet rush seemed to slip

away, and she began to move for him again. Rotating her hips in a small circle, Kyra started to draw soft, gasping moans from him. He slowed down and lowered his head to her shoulder.

“Lady, you feel amazing.”

She laughed, her voice full of sex and pleasure. “Don’t stop.”

“I won’t.”

A shiver ran down her back as she pressed further back. “Harder.”

“That’s right, tell me what you want.” Alex grabbed hold of the headboard, wrapping his fingers around the iron bar beside hers. “Tell me.”

“Fuck me harder.” She moved against him, and a choking sob broke from her lips as he started to thrust harder into her.

Keeping one hand on the headboard, he let one hand travel up her back and into her hair as he pushed into her body. Fisting his hand in her hair, he pulled her head back. “You like this?”

“Oh, yes.” Kyra took in a deep breath as he kissed her neck and released her hair.

Alex picked the vibrator up off the bed, and with careful fingers tucked the small metal cylinder between her labia. Pressing it there, he spoke in a rough voice. “Turn it on.”

Kyra grasped for the remote and flipped it on. “Fuck.”

“All the way on.”

Closing her eyes, she flipped the control to its highest setting and dropped it on the bed. She put her hand back on the headboard and let her head fall forward as he started to thrust into her again. The hum of the vibrator on her clit and the thick thrust of his cock in her cunt were making her delirious.

“Alex,” Kyra moaned as she closed her eyes.

“Give in,” he demanded, thrusting into her hard.

“Yes. Yes.” She pushed back against his cock, aching with desperate need. “God, Alex.”

“That’s it, baby. Let it take you.”

“It’s too much.” She sobbed and stiffened as another orgasm rushed over her. She screamed with it, jerking against him.

Alex held her tight as she shook, and let the vibrator drop down on the bed as he quickened inside her. Her pussy tightened and pulsed with her orgasm, and just seconds passed before he lost it. He pumped deep into her as he came, his hands once more on the headboard next to hers.

Kissing her shoulder, he ran his hands down her sides and then up to remove her hands from the bar. She rested against him and gasped softly as he pulled from her. Kyra sighed and closed her eyes as she sat back on her knees. She’d never been so truly fucked in her life. Her

body humming with orgasm, she stretched out on the bed and watched him go into the bathroom.

Alex looked back at the bed where Kyra still sprawled. She was sexy and so very strong. In many ways, she was nothing like the women he normally involved himself with. He'd always liked the women in his life to be bold and adventurous. But Kyra was a whole different sort of woman. She was strong in ways that most women weren't; yet it didn't make her any less female.

He turned on the water to wash his hands and glanced up in the mirror as soft fingers moved up his back. "I'm not finished with you."

She moved to his side and wet her bottom lip with the tip of her tongue as she moved her finger over one of his nipples. The flesh immediately hardened under her attention. "We aren't finished with each other. Shower?"

"Yeah."

"I'll get some towels."

He watched her stroll naked from the bathroom, shaken once again by the way he was attracted to her. Just looking at her made him start to get hard. There were women in his past who'd turned him on, but never so fast and so hard. He closed his eyes and lowered his head as he thought about her lying beneath him on the bed. She'd opened up for him like they'd been lovers for years. She came back in and dropped some towels on the counter next to the shower. Her body was curvy and lush, but it was obvious she spent some time in a gym. Being a cop, he supposed, had its requirements.

"I've never been involved with a cop before."

She offered him a grin over her shoulder as she stepped into the stall and turned on the water. "Relax. I don't bring out the restraints until, like, week four or five."

He found the thought of being restrained by her stimulating. Shaking his head, he slipped into the stall with her and pulled her close. Leaning into him briefly, she shook back her hair and met his gaze.

"We moved a little faster than I'm used to." He ran his thumb along her lip. "Faster than I intended. If you want to back off a little, I'll deal with it."

Kyra chuckled. "I was a fairly active player, Alex. I'm a big girl. If I hadn't wanted you in my bed, I wouldn't have answered the door." She turned in to the water and sighed when he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him. "I wanted you in the office."

"You really have no idea how difficult that was." He kissed her neck softly, brushing damp black curls out of his way. "I have way too many rules in my life."

She laughed and reached for the cleansing gel. "I can work around them."

He took the tube from her and spilled gel into the palm of his hand. Kyra leaned back against him as he tossed the tube back onto the built-in shelf and rubbed his hands together.

Alex cupped her breasts, spreading the scented soap over her skin. Arching in his arms, Kyra sucked in a breath and looked down. Alex pinched her nipples, and she shuddered. He was the first black man she'd ever been involved with sexually, and the sight of his dark hands on her breasts was enough to make her desperate for more of him.

Chapter Four

Traffic in New Orleans was a complete bitch, but the hustle and bustle of Thursday morning made Kyra smile. Her comm-u buzzed and engaged automatically. The tiny earpiece she'd slipped into her ear that morning reported the incoming caller's name just before it connected.

"Good morning, Nana." Kyra grinned at the huge sigh she heard in response. She only called her "Nana" in private, but it was enough.

Sharon Moray was the centerpiece of an old-school social circle in New Orleans that thrived on gossip and prizewinning roses. She sniffed delicately. "I hate it when you call me that."

Kyra laughed; she knew that wasn't true. She'd had Sharon wrapped around her finger since the day she was born. "So, what's on your agenda today?"

"Oh, I have a meeting with the Garden Club this morning, and then I thought we could have lunch in the quarter."

"Well, I have plans for lunch."

"Business or personal?"

"Personal."

"Man or woman?"

"Man."

"Fuckable?"

Kyra laughed. Only Nana could get away with saying the word "fuckable" at seventy-two years old. "Yes, as a matter of fact, he is."

"Good luck in your conquest, dear. I'll take Della to lunch instead."

Kyra was still shaking her head when she pulled into a parking spot and swung out of her vehicle. Bodies moved in and out of the District 4 police station with enough regularity that it looked like business as usual. Once in the fine, historical building, she settled down in her office and brooded a little.

She enjoyed waking up with Alex Waters entirely too much. She'd had relationships that got hot and heavy faster than they should have, in the past. Kyra was honest enough with herself to admit that she loved sex, and sex with a man like Alexander Waters was just pure pleasure. Grinning, she let herself drift to a memory from this morning.

The picture of Alex kneeling between her legs, his big, thick cock in hand, came to mind quickly. He was so sexy. She stood and walked to her one window. Sitting down on the bay, she looked out into the traffic and tried to push her new lover out of her mind. It was difficult, as her body was already heated with the thought of him and his amazing cock.

The door to her office swung open, and she turned to look at Phil. Her gaze narrowed as she took in his disheveled appearance. "Late night?"

"Early morning," he muttered as he sat down at his own desk. "What's on the agenda today?"

"The conversation with William LaRoux."

"I'll set up a meet."

"Outside the station; I want him to be more at ease this time around." Kyra stood, disgruntled that the arrival of her partner had gotten rid of every ounce of sexual desire she'd had swirling around in her body. It wasn't that Phil was unattractive. He had a nice face that he kept clean-shaven, his sandy brown hair was styled fashionably, and he kept fit. He just wasn't Alex. "I'm going to go give Parker a visit."

"He said he should be done some time this morning." Phil turned toward his desk-station.

Kyra walked into Jeffrey Parker's office with a box of frosted blueberry pastries. Since she was there to pressure him, she thought it was better to come with a gift.

Jeffrey looked up and sighed as she closed the door. "It's some freaky shit, Kyra."

She set the box down on the desk and grinned when he snatched it up and shoved it into a drawer. "How freaky?"

"Freaky enough that my wife and daughter aren't going alone anywhere until you catch this guy." He leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "I kept coming back to how clean the body was ... so I did some testing. He wiped her down with cleansing wipes -- the kind for babies -- before he left her. It took time. He must have had at least thirty minutes with her. Whatever he did, he had to have a place to do it."

"So, he strips her, wipes her down like a newborn, and takes skin."

"That's not all. Her toxicology screen results show a high dosage of belladonna."

“Fuck.” Kyra glared at him briefly, then crossed her arms over her chest.

“Yeah, it fits with the vial of bones.” He shrugged. “There’s more.”

“Somehow I knew there would be.”

“The belladonna didn’t kill her; it didn’t have time.” Jeffrey stood and walked away from her. “She drowned.”

“Excuse me?”

He looked back at her, already anticipating her ire. “Her lungs were full of water, and it didn’t come from a tap.”

“So, he uses the belladonna to subdue her?”

“Yeah. Her blood-alcohol level was low, but there was enough alcohol in her stomach that I’d say he gave her the poison in a drink.”

“Wait, this girl was at work. She was going about her business just fine. Anyone that had seen her would have known if she’d been drinking.” Kyra stood and walked away. “This is just a big fucking mess.”

“Just walk through it; you’ll get the picture,” Jeffrey murmured.

Kyra shook back her hair and pictured Donna’s body. “Okay, she goes on break. She makes a pass by her locker to grab her cigarettes. They’re unopened. She doesn’t even smoke. She just uses it as an excuse to get out of the noise and crowd. Out in the alley ...” She paused. “Fuck, she knew him.”

“Yeah, she did.”

“He offers her a drink.” Kyra sat down and closed her eyes. “She’s worked all night and needs a little bit more of a break. She isn’t going to drink much; no one will notice if she comes back with a little buzz.”

“It was a good whiskey; it would have gone down smooth and easy. Belladonna has a bitter taste, but the alcohol would have obliterated most, if not all, of that.”

Kyra nodded. “Crap, Jeffrey, this seriously sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“How did he get the water in her lungs?”

“She has some scrape marks at the back of her throat. I’d speculate that he shoved a small piece of tubing down her windpipe and likely used a funnel to pour about a half-gallon of water into her lungs.”

“Water from the bayou.”

“It’s a guess, at this point. I can tell you it wasn’t treated water or saltwater.”

“Overkill,” she murmured.

“Indeed. The belladonna would have done the job.”

“He cut her after she was dead.”

“Yes.”

“Anything else?”

“Her armpits, pubic area, and legs were freshly shaven. I don’t know if it was her doing or his.”

That shot the freak meter about six inches higher. Grimly, she considered the crime scene; the picture was still fresh in her head. “The tarp?”

“Cut from something larger. My guess is he put it down so she wouldn’t get dirty.”

Kyra shouldered her bag and looked at him. “Report?”

“Already been transmitted.” He met her gaze. “Say, your partner came down here last night.”

“Yeah, I sent him.”

He shook his head. “He got a little green. I was still working on her when he arrived.”

“Murder is new to him,” Kyra responded. “His last detail was in narcotics.” She squared her shoulders. “He’ll toughen up.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “If I get another body, we’ll need to call in for extra help. I have someone in mind.”

Kyra walked back and forth across the alley several times and then stopped where she knew Donna’s body had been. The pavement still had a faint outline of her body from the laser they’d used to mark it off. The back door to Valteau’s opened, and two waitresses bustled out, each with a cigarette already in hand.

“Good afternoon, ladies.” Kyra inclined her head. “What’s the special?”

“Noel’s got a fresh catch of crawfish on the boil.”

Kyra nodded and turned away. There was something about this alley that didn’t quite add up. Something had changed since she’d been in it last. She looked back to the women. “There were two recyclers removed. Only one was replaced.”

“Yeah.” The blonde nodded and motioned across the alley. “The guy who bought that salon brought in a special container because he was renovating. They finished yesterday afternoon.”

“You guys get a lot of workers from the construction?”

“Yeah. Shitty tippers, but polite enough.” She popped her gum and put her cigarette back to her lips. “You that cop?”

“I am with NOPD,” Kyra returned neutrally. “Inspector Kyra Moray.”

“Dorothy Freedman; most people just call me Dot.” Dot jerked her head toward the other waitress. “That, there, is Louise.” She dropped her cigarette to the ground and snubbed it out with the toe of her shoe. “Donna never worked the day shift. She had those classes of

hers in the morning and afternoons. Sometimes she'd come in for lunch, sit at the counter, and chat with us. Good kid. Shouldn't have happened to a kid like her."

"It shouldn't have happened to anyone," Kyra murmured. "You guys see anyone hanging around here?"

"Just you." Dot grinned and pulled another cigarette out.

Kyra shook her head as she watched the older woman fumble with a lighter. Her platinum-blond hair was pinned neatly on top of her head; her nails were painted a startling shade of orange. Her fingers trembled a little as she lit the cigarette and handed the lighter to the redheaded waitress who hadn't met Kyra's gaze once. "You know something?"

Dot turned to glare at her friend. "Louise, you know something and not share?"

Kyra almost laughed at her tone. Dot clearly wasn't someone to not share information or gossip with. She walked over to the women and shook her head when Dot silently offered her pack of cigarettes. "Your name is Louise?"

"Yes." Louise had a small little-girl voice that didn't fit her plus-sized body.

"Did you have something you'd like to share with me about Donna?"

"No. No." Louise shook her head so rapidly that three of the hairpins holding her hairnet in place flew out. She sucked on her cigarette and shook her head again. "No."

"Now, Louise, I gotta tell you, I don't think we believe that." She looked at Dot. "Do we believe that Louise has nothing to tell me?"

Dot chewed her gum thoughtfully and then took a drag off her cigarette. "I ain't buying it."

"There you go, Louise. Dot ain't buying it."

Louise took a deep breath and looked away from them both. "It's probably nothing."

"I hear a lot of nothings all day long." Kyra shoved her hands into the pockets of her loose jeans and rocked on her heels a bit. "Nobody but Dot will know you told me."

"Ya know I can keep a secret," Dot declared. "I didn't tell a soul you went and fucked ..." Dot paused, then grinned. "Well, I didn't tell nobody."

Louise blushed. "Dot, I swear."

"Spill it." Kyra's tone was soft but firm.

"Fine. Donna had a boyfriend."

"I knew that."

Louise shook her head. "No, ya didn't. No one knew but me. She had a boyfriend at that school she was going to. Donna said his name was Sam."

"Sam."

"Yeah, Sam." Louise pulled out another cigarette and lit it with the one she was almost finished with.

Kyra focused on her and tried not to glare. She was running short on patience. "Sam?"

"Yeah, Sam. He was in her class, journalism or something. Donna said he was pretty and thoughtful. Never took with a pretty man myself. She fell hard for him but didn't want her family to know."

"Especially not her stepbrother."

Louise shrugged. "Her brother is a good one. He took care of Donna and her mother."

"Did you ever catch Sam's last name?"

"No."

"Did you ever see him with Donna?"

"No, only her stepbrother."

"Why didn't anyone at the diner mention Donna's stepbrother during the interviews?"

"Don't know." Dot shrugged. "He never came around much. At least, he never came inside. Noel doesn't like the staff to get a lot of social calls. I think he used to meet Donna back here sometimes."

Kyra nodded. "Thank you, ladies."

Dot elbowed Louise as Kyra walked away. "Why didn't I know?"

"Cause you can't keep a secret," Louise snapped, and turned on her heel to go back inside.

* * * * *

Kyra sat down across the table from William LaRoux and was silent for a moment. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with us."

William shrugged as Phil came back to the table with a tray of coffee and pastries. "Free food."

Kyra nodded and snagged her own coffee. She watched him fiddle with his, then cleared her throat. "So, William, did you plan to tell me that Donna had a boyfriend?"

William frowned. "She didn't have a boyfriend."

Kyra folded her hands in front of her. "Then who is Sam?"

"Sam?" William's confusion seemed genuine. "Sam's a girl. She went to school with Donna."

"Did you ever meet Sam?"

"Yeah." He looked down to the pile of empty sugar packets and shrugged. "Nice enough girl; sort of dyke, though."

That, Kyra thought, is just lovely. Inwardly groaning, she tore open a couple of packages of sugar and doctored her coffee. "William, I'm going to ask a frank question, and I need an equally frank response from you."

“Okay.” He sat up straighter in his chair and met her gaze.

“Did Donna keep her pubic area shaved?”

Silence.

William cleared his throat several times and then shook his head. “No, she didn’t. We tried it once, but she didn’t like it. That was about a year ago. The last time I saw her, she wasn’t shaved.”

“You saw her the day before she was murdered.”

“Yeah, she came to my apartment.”

“Okay.” Kyra stirred her coffee thoughtfully. “Did you like it?”

“The shaving?” William blushed. “I mean, it was pretty cool, intimate.”

“Would she have shaved for you as a surprise?”

William LaRoux lowered his eyes to the table. “I don’t think so. The great part about it was that we did it to each other.” He paused and cleared his throat. “She was shaved when you found her, huh?”

Kyra nodded. “That isn’t going to be published in the papers, William. You wouldn’t know at all if I had a choice.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

She stood and grabbed her coffee. “Did Donna have a birthmark or a beauty spot of any kind?”

“No.”

“Okay, then.” Phil stood. “I’m going to get a refill.” He looked at William. “Try not to think about it, kid.”

William nodded, but focused on Kyra. “You won’t let him go unpunished, will you?”

“I believe in justice, William. Some might say I’m obsessed with it.”

“I’m glad.” William picked up his coffee, gathered their trash, and picked up the tray. “Donna deserves to have a cop like that.”

Kyra watched him hurry off and then looked toward her partner. He was standing near the entrance, waiting for her. She walked to him, “What do you think?”

“He’s messed up.”

“Yeah, sometimes the victims we deal with aren’t dead.” Kyra walked out of the door and looked around the street. “I’m going to break for lunch. I’ll meet you back at the station at two.”

* * * * *

Hello, walking wet dream, Alex thought as Kyra came through the entrance of his place. She was wearing tan slacks and a dark blue shirt that stretched over her breasts and lay flat against her stomach. Her dark hair was loose and falling down over her shoulders.

He couldn't figure out what it was about the woman that made his blood burn. He'd never known a woman like her. She smiled as she caught sight of him and walked down the length of the bar to slip onto a stool in front of him.

"You still have time for lunch?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Good. I thought we could go back to my place and forget that we need food."

Alex pushed through the door that closed off the bar. "Sounds good."

"I thought so."

Kyra took the hand he offered and let him pull her off the stool. "It's a good thing I live close."

"It sure the hell is," Alex muttered as he tugged her toward the door.

Kyra laughed and quickened her pace just as the door opened. Her gaze immediately focused on her grandmother. It was an unbelievable coincidence. They both stopped, caught in the society maven's gaze.

Sharon Moray was seventy-two years old and didn't look a day over forty. She was a walking testimonial for anti-aging vaccination. Her chocolate-brown eyes sparkled with vitality and amusement. Her hair was still raven, her face and body a near work of art that she paid handsomely for. The only wrinkles on Sharon were on her clothes, and they were there only because she preferred fine linen to synthetic materials.

She grinned. "Kyra, dear, I didn't realize you knew Alex."

Kyra pulled her fingers from Alex's as her grandmother approached, and accepted her grandmother's embrace. "Nana."

"Mrs. Moray." Alex accepted her grandmother's hands with a warm smile and the realization that he probably wasn't going to get laid.

"Oh, you both look so disappointed." Sharon clucked her tongue and then laughed. "Della will be here any minute to entertain me." She kissed Kyra's cheek. "Enjoy your *lunch*, dear."

Kyra chuckled as her grandmother sauntered away with a wink. "The woman never ceases to amaze me."

"Let's get out of here before she changes her mind."

Kyra slipped astride Alex and watched as his eyes darkened with anticipation. Slowly, she impaled herself on the thick length of him. His hands caught briefly at her hips, but she pulled them away and held them.

“Relax, I got this.”

He hissed in a breath. “You certainly do.”

Shifting beneath her, he flexed his hips upward as she started to move. He’d never had a woman take him so completely and enjoy it the way Kyra did. The feel of her was seductive, far more seductive than he’d ever thought possible. Alex entwined his fingers with hers and watched as her eyes closed. He let her rock on him, every movement of her body on his sending hot waves of pleasure over him.

Kyra let go of his hands and ran her fingers over her stomach before tweaking her nipples. He tensed under her and moaned a little between clenched teeth. She kept her rhythm as he moved his hands over her thighs and up to her hips. It had only been roughly six hours since he’d been inside her, and it had felt like forever on their walk to her apartment.

Alex pushed one thumb gently against her clit and pressed. Every movement she made rubbed that hard nub all over his thumb. She stilled briefly, taking in a deep breath. A soft, husky moan slipped from her lips as she began to move again.

“Talk to me.”

Her hands stilled on her breasts. The soft demand sent a chill down her back. “Do you want me tell you how much I love sitting on your big, thick cock?”

He laughed softly and arched under her. “I think you’re too much for me, lady.”

Slowly, she leaned down and put her hands on either side of his head. “I could tell you that I’ve never been fucked so well in my life until you.” Brushing her lips across his, she grinned as his hands moved down her back to cup her ass. “Is that what you want to hear?”

Alex gripped her tightly and rolled them over. He thrust deep and hard into her. “I feel like you were made for me.”

She wrapped her legs around his waist and pushed up against him as he thrust again. Running a hand down his face, she touched his lips briefly. “You fill me, Alex. It’s never been so good.”

The admission brought an intimacy that neither one of them was prepared to deal with. Sensing that she felt she’d gone too far, he lowered his mouth and took hers in a hard kiss. Pressed fully against her, he let his tongue play with hers while he continued to push and pull from her body at a pace that would drive them both to orgasm.

Alex released her mouth and slowed his stroke, watching her face carefully as he pressed fully into her and stilled. Buried to the hilt, he moved slowly in a circular motion until her eyes fluttered and she squeezed them close. “Don’t close your eyes.”

Sucking in a breath, Kyra forced her eyes open and met his gaze. Skin dampened with sweat as they moved against each other, both straining, resisting giving in to the pleasure of the other. They stretched out the physical union because the sudden emotional entanglement was confusing.

He quickened above her, and she clung to him as he drove them both. She arched and twisted beneath him as he slipped one hand between them and stroked her. The furious and delicious action on her clit brought a series of broken, breathy moans from her mouth.

"Please."

"Please, what?"

"Alex." Her nails raked down his back, and her whole body shuddered as she thrust upward against him, wet with orgasm.

"I'm here." He kissed her mouth softly and slowed down. "This is my pussy, isn't it?"

She nodded, overwhelmed. "Yes. Yes. It's yours."

"You belong to me."

"I do." She sobbed against his neck as he thrust into her one final time and stilled. His whole body stiffened as he came, then collapsed on her with a soft groan.

Kyra closed her eyes and stroked his back.

Alex came up behind her as she put down a hairbrush. Carefully, he placed a kiss on her neck. "That was the best lunch I've ever had."

She laughed and turned in his arms. There was no sense wondering what was happening between them, not when there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it. Kyra slipped her arms up around his neck and looked over his face. He did look supremely satisfied.

"Yeah, I gotta agree."

He lifted one hand and ran it along the length of her shoulder until he encountered her holster. "You are one sexy bitch cop."

She laughed. "You bet your ass."

He kissed her lips and grinned. "Inspector, you look thoroughly fucked."

"Well, you did an exceptional job."

Kyra exited the stairs and looked toward the main desk. A young woman in uniform was there. Frowning, she tried to place her. "Constable Salanti."

"Yes, ma'am."

Kyra grinned as she straightened. "That accent is pure New York Dome. Noticed it the other night. What brought you this far south?"

Ana Salanti grinned. "The men are too pretty around here. I came down for Mardi Gras and never left."

Kyra had to agree, since she'd just left a very good-looking one herself. "I've no doubts. I'm here to visit Jerald Capshaw."

Ana picked up her p-pc and then frowned. "He got transferred to St. Martin's last night."

"St. Martin's?" Kyra frowned. "What the hell for?"

Ana pursed her lips. "The on-duty officer, Constable Fredericks, indicated that Mr. Capshaw started screaming and tearing off his clothes. He was hallucinating heavily, and they could find no evidence that he'd taken anything. He was sent to St. Martin's for evaluation before his hearing this afternoon."

"I'll check back later. I'm going to be in the field after I finish my lunch." She shifted her bag on her shoulder and looked back at Ana. "What?"

"Nothing, ma'am."

"You're grinning, Constable."

"It's a real problem for me. Terminal happiness."

Like hell, Kyra thought. She narrowed her gaze. "I'll call back in about Capshaw."

Kyra stalked purposefully through the maze of desks and went into her office. She found Phil already there. Dropping her sandwich on the desk, she shrugged off her bag and sighed. "Capshaw went mental last night."

"Yep." Phil turned in his seat. "Kept screaming that you'd put a curse on him."

Kyra laughed as she sat down with her sandwich. "Well, that's a first."

Phil shrugged. "I called the university and got Donna's schedule. Two names popped -- Samantha Rivers, who took algebra II with her, and Samuel Killian, who took mass communications with her."

"Well, now, that's interesting."

"I pulled both of their schedules. Samantha has indicated that she'll come in for an interview whenever we want. Samuel Killian refused to admit that he knew Donna personally."

"We'll start with him." She unwrapped her sandwich and looked at him. He was staring at her. "What?"

"I thought you went to lunch."

"I spent too much time talking." She bit into her sandwich and hoped, for the love of God, that she wasn't blushing.

"Must have been one hell of a conversation." Phil turned back to his desk. "I see you got the report back from Parker."

"Yeah, that is some freaky shit. Have you had time to read through it?" She looked up.

He shrugged. "Yeah, a little. I could have done without the pictures. What's the next step?"

“Well, Clara indicated the vial was a standard token as far as Voodoo goes. Considering our location, we could probably find half a dozen shops that sell them. I’m going to put a couple of uniforms on that this afternoon. We’re going to find Samuel Killian and see just how well he didn’t know Donna.”

Chapter Five

Kyra just purely loved making a scene. She imagined it was her southern roots getting the better of her, but that didn't stop her. Flipping open her badge, she came to a halt in front of the classroom. The professor was a sleekly dressed woman with a soft voice and an expressive face.

"Good afternoon. I'm Inspector Moray."

The woman paused, then took the hand Kyra offered. "Yes, of course." She swallowed hard. "Arabella Swan." She glanced briefly at her class and found them silent and fidgeting. Focusing on Kyra, she cleared her throat. "This is about Donna LaRoux?"

"Yes."

Arabella squared her shoulders and nodded. "Should I dismiss my class?"

"No." Kyra pulled her hand free, aware the other woman was nervous and out of sorts. "Phil, why don't you take Professor Swan to her office while I speak with the students?"

He came forward immediately. Kyra spared him a glance as he hustled the woman out of the room. She leaned against the professor's desk and looked around the classroom. "I realize that all of you are uncomfortable with the death of your classmate. Some of you may even feel guilty because you are relieved it was her instead of you." There was a shifting of bodies and a few hushed whispers. "Any of you who can provide information about the day she died should stay and answer a few basic questions." She looked around as several young men started to get up. "Samuel Killian."

Several pairs of eyes jerked toward the back of the room. "Yes, ma'am?"

"You'll be staying, as well."

He sat back down, and most of the class flooded out. He looked to be about twenty-three, with dark brown hair that fell down his shoulders in layers. Samuel Killian had a

poetic look about him that was startling, and Kyra was sure that he used his looks to their full advantage. He must have turned Donna LaRoux's head easily.

Kyra looked over the two young women who had stayed, and then to Sam. She wasn't surprised that he seemed nervous. Most people found one reason or another not to trust cops. She pulled out her p-pc and engaged the recorder. "Okay, ladies, we'll start with you."

Both of them stood and moved to seats directly in front of Kyra. The blonde spoke first. "When she came into class that day, she was nervous, sort of upset."

"Did she tell you why?"

"She'd had an argument with her brother." The answer came from the other girl. Her hair was up in a series of tiny braids, and glasses perched on her nose with the appearance more of fashion than actual function. "That Monday was a project day. We have lectures on Tuesday and Thursdays ..." She paused as if she realized she was about to start rambling. "She spent most of the class working on her graphic design."

"Your names?"

The blonde pushed hair over her shoulder. "I'm Denise Willis."

"Monica Sales."

"Okay, Monica, do you know what the argument was about?"

Monica shook her head. "No, she just said he needed to learn to give her space."

"He was protective of her, had been ever since their daddy died." Denise leaned in. "He had a heart attack."

Monica nodded. "Yeah, about a year ago. Very sudden. Donna didn't talk about it much."

"Their father walked in on the two of them fucking."

The answer had come from Sam. Both girls jerked and turned to face him. He'd remained in his seat in the back of the room. Sam stood up slowly and walked down the stairs to the front. "They were stepbrother and -sister, but I imagine you know that, Inspector."

"Yes." Kyra watched him sit down in a desk behind Denise.

"She broke up with him the day the stepfather died. Said she couldn't take the stress of their relationship anymore. Donna felt guilty for what happened to her stepfather, but William didn't."

Kyra pulled out two cards and handed them to Denise and Monica. "If you ladies think of anything she might have said or done that day that was unusual, I want you to call me."

They took the cards and hurried out of the room. Sam watched them go with a smile that would have been amused if he hadn't looked so sad. "Donna was messed up."

"I'm getting that picture, Sam."

“Her relationship with her stepbrother bothered her and made her feel guilty. At first, I think she was just as angry as he was over the fact that their parents got married. They both worked very hard to convince their parents that their relationship was no longer romantic. Then things changed. She loved her stepfather and grew to accept him in her life. When she did, she began to question her relationship with William. That’s when he pushed her into sex. I’m not saying he raped her, just pushed and pushed at her until she didn’t know what to do.”

“And the day she died?”

“I forced her to break up with him, again. I mean, not forced, but made her understand that she would never get what she wanted out of her life if she let him always make choices and decisions for her. Apparently, he was furious with her and refused to accept it. When she came to class, it looked like she’d been crying.”

“Have you ever met William?”

“No.”

“Did he know she was involved with another man?”

“Not from her. Donna loved William a great deal; she wouldn’t have wanted to hurt him. She was just ready to live her own life.”

“You liked her a lot.”

“Yeah, it was pretty hard not to. She was beautiful, smart, and she had a great laugh. Donna had a lot to offer the world. I wanted to be a part of her life. I knew if she could get past her relationship with her stepbrother, we had a chance at something special. I knew she had a lot of issues, but hell, in the world we live in, who doesn’t come with a ton of emotional baggage? I was willing to wade through all of it. She was special -- bright, like a diamond.”

“So?”

“She didn’t know her well. I guess with a class that size, there isn’t time for a lot of personal instruction.” Phil browsed his p-pc as he spoke. “Donna was a good student, always on time, did well on assignments, and participated in class. It was obvious she spent a lot of time with her course materials.”

Kyra nodded. “Yeah.”

“What did the kid have to say?”

“William’s father died of a heart attack. He walked in on the two of them having sex, his anger induced a heart attack, and he died.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.” Kyra grimaced. “He also said that Donna broke up with William the day she died. Call a unit; I want him picked up and brought in for more questioning.”

She focused on the road while Phil input the request via his p-pc. Traffic was heavy enough to keep her attention, and she was glad. Kyra didn't want to think about that soft, dewy-eyed look on Sam Killian's face another minute more than she had to.

"Is that all?"

"He was in love with her. However, more than that, she was a victim. A victim he wanted to save and protect. He views William as some sort of predator who used sex to keep Donna close." She remembered the look of pity and remorse on Sam's face.

"You don't agree?"

"I don't." Kyra shook her head. "You know what? Not one person I've questioned had anything bad to say about her."

"So?"

"So, do you know a single person who is perfect?"

Phil shook his head. "No."

"Neither do I. Put in a call to Samantha Rivers. I'm going to want to meet with her before William."

Samantha Rivers was down at the station before they arrived. Kyra was surprised and a little wary of her. An eager witness always put her on edge. She entered the interview room and looked briefly toward the mirror. Phil was in the observation area.

"Samantha."

Samantha Rivers flashed Kyra a friendly smile and then grew serious. "Inspector Moray, I'm sort of surprised I didn't hear from you sooner. Donna and I have been best friends since the fifth grade."

"I'm beginning to discover William wasn't exactly forthcoming about Donna's friends."

"Donna didn't have many friends." Samantha shrugged, rolling an empty water cup between her hands. "William didn't like her spending much time with anyone but him. That's why she enrolled in college the moment she had enough money saved to pay for a semester."

"To get away from William?"

"To get space," Samantha corrected. "She loved William, though I can tell she was very worried that her mother would find out about them, especially after her stepdaddy died."

"He caught William and Donna having sex."

"Well, he walked in on William having a meal, if you get my meaning."

Kyra almost laughed at the girl's droll tone. "What about Samuel Killian?"

"That hot guy she had class with?" Samantha pulled a piece of chewing gum from the tiny purse on the table and unwrapped it. "She had seriously wet panties for that boy. But I don't think she was brave enough to go for it."

"Because of William?"

"Well, yeah, and her mom."

"Her mom?"

"Oh, yeah, you know ... the hand that rocks the cradle sort of thing. Cecilia LaRoux ruled Donna's life. The only time she got to leave the house was for work and school, unless she was going somewhere with William."

"What about dating?"

"Cece wouldn't take with that. Donna was pure as the driven snow, as far as her mother was concerned. She didn't date, didn't want to date, and never would date."

"That's a little unrealistic."

"Well, I never said her mom wasn't a crazy-ass wench, did I?" Samantha popped her gum. "Heard she attacked you when you told her about Donna."

Kyra had to laugh at that. "As a matter of fact, she did." She touched her jaw but knew the bruising was gone. "What would you say about Donna's personality?"

"Oh, well, Donna was very good at getting what she wanted from people. She led William around by the nose. She says jump, and he asks how high while he was in the air. She had a pretty small comfort zone though."

"How small?"

"Well, ya know that hot-ass guy at school? Maybe she would have hooked up with him if she thought he could be controlled. She liked to be in control."

"You were right."

Kyra frowned as she sat down behind her desk. "Look at our victim, Phil; she's young, pretty, smart, and manipulative. She isn't that much different from any other young woman starting out in the world. She wanted to be in control of her life and her destiny. Maybe she took it too far, but experience would have smoothed those edges. She might have always been something of a man-eater, but there's nothing about her that sticks out to me."

"*Man-eater* is a little harsh."

"She was fucking two different men and pretending for all the world that she was innocent." Kyra shrugged. "Donna had a plan, and I think only she knew what it was."

"So, she's the ordinary girl starting out in the world. Not too pretty, not too smart, and a little selfish," Phil muttered. "She's got two guys stringing along after her ass like she's the next-best thing to artificial gravity. So, why did he pick her?"

"He knew her. Maybe William and Sam weren't the only guys she was stringing along." Kyra stood. "I want you to do the questioning on William this time. When you have him all soft and comfortable, I'll move in for the kill. He's got a lot of explaining to do."

Kyra followed Phil out of their office and down the hall to the interrogation room where William was. He stood the moment they opened the door.

"Hey, kid, take a seat."

William's gaze darted from Phil's smile to Kyra's stare. He swallowed. "Did you find out something?"

"Yep." Phil sat down. "You lied to us, kid. We need to clear up a few things."

Kyra almost smiled. She loved Phil's version of good cop. She sat down in a chair away from the table and crossed her arms as William stuttered his way through a denial.

"Now, denying it is just going to piss me off," Phil admonished.

"Just tell me what you want me to say," William snapped.

"Donna wasn't allowed to date. She could only leave the house for work, school, or an activity with you."

William grimaced. "That sounds bad. That wasn't how it was."

"Really? Because it sounds like Donna had no escape from you or her mother. She was either with her mother, who smothered her with attention, or she was with you, her stepbrother, who pushed her into sex."

"I didn't push Donna into anything," William insisted. "I loved her and she loved me."

"Did she?"

"Look, I've tried to be honest with you guys." He looked almost helplessly at Kyra, but one look at her expression told him he'd get no help there. "You act like Donna was a prisoner, but she wasn't."

"Tell us about the day your father died."

William flushed and his gaze dropped to the table. "He had a heart attack."

"Did he?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Dead silence followed that question.

Kyra stood from her chair and walked around the table once before putting a file folder down between them. "What, William, you don't want to admit that your daddy walked in while you were servicing your stepsister and the shock of it killed him?"

She sat down in a chair on the end of the table and opened the folder.

"It wasn't ... aw, Christ." William rubbed his face. "My dad was furious. He came into the room and started hitting us. The next thing I know, he's clutching at his chest and falling onto the floor. He was dead before the ambulance even got there. That kind of thing isn't supposed to happen, you know?"

"That event upset Donna a great deal. So much, in fact, that she tried to end your physical relationship."

"No."

"It took her a year, but she finally managed to break up with you the day she died."

"No, it wasn't like that."

"William, I need the truth. The absolute truth, if we're going to reconstruct Donna's last day. It's the only way we're going to catch the bastard who did this to her." Kyra put a full body shot -- Donna lying in the alley -- in front of William. "You don't want him to get away with this, do you?"

William stared at the picture for a long time, his face pale. With a small tremor in his hand, he pulled the photograph closer. A visible shudder swept over the length of his body. "No. No. This is horrible."

Kyra was silent for a moment as she studied him. She knew the moment he saw it. "What?"

"Do you have a closer picture of her left shoulder?"

She pulled the picture out that depicted the single wound to Donna's body. "As far as we can tell, he kept the skin."

William swallowed audibly and closed his eyes. "She had a tattoo there."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It was a tiny black cat with its tail wrapped around its front paws. It had bright green eyes." He shrugged. "Cute, and it certainly suited her."

"Where did she get it?"

"I don't know." He frowned and then sighed. "She got it one night during Mardi Gras after we argued. She stormed out of my place, and the next time I saw her she had it. I never learned who did it."

"The day she died?"

"Yeah, we argued. She was sort of combative that day, like she wanted me to get angry with her. When I didn't, she told me we were finished, then she left. I was so pissed, I took a shuttle-bus to see my grandparents."

* * * * *

The Smythe House was in dinner mode when Kyra arrived. Professor Willie's words had pushed at her as she crossed town to the halfway house.

"Inspector Moray."

She turned from her place in the entryway of the dining room and looked toward Neal Valteau. "Neal, where's Willie?"

"He's taking his meal upstairs."

"Has he bottomed?"

"I've had a doctor come through and check him over. We're pretty sure that he's not an alcoholic at all."

Kyra's mouth dropped open. "Neal, I've never seen him on the street sober."

Neal motioned towards the stairs. "Come on, I know it doesn't make sense, but he doesn't have the shakes, hasn't gotten violent, and not one single request for a drink. He just sits in his room and reads. Reads to the others if they come in and sit with him."

He took her down a narrow hall. The last door was Willie's. She glanced at Neal as she knocked; she didn't know how to deal with what he'd told her. If Willie wasn't an alcoholic, why had he spent so much time on the street? She'd never believed him to be mentally unstable, just depressed and drunk.

Willie opened the door and looked down into Kyra's face with a smile. "Inspector Moray."

"Professor, may I come in?"

"Sure, sure."

Neal grinned. "Remember the rules, Willie. No female visitors after eight p.m."

Kyra laughed as Neal disappeared down the hall. She shut the door and turned to Willie. "I need to ask you a question, Professor Barnes."

He raised an eyebrow and sighed. "I guess Neal told you."

Kyra glared briefly. "Oh, trust me, we'll be getting to you shortly. Tell me what you know about the murder."

"Don't know much."

"You said he took something from her."

"Yeah."

"You saw the body before it was found."

"I was there in the alleyway when he laid her out. I didn't see his face, and he didn't see me at all."

"Tell me what you saw."

"I've already told you all that I saw."

Kyra forced herself to lean back in the chair she'd sat down in. "So, why pretend to be a drunk and live on the street?"

He was silent for several minutes. Finally, he just shook his head.

"One day soon, Professor Barnes, you *will* tell me why you've spent twelve years of your life on the street."

Kyra left the Smythe House disgruntled and mildly irritated. She hated the waste of life that Willie Barnes represented. Once in her transport, she drove across town and back into the French Quarter. She had a date with Glory, and it wasn't going to be pleasant. She honestly didn't know how Glory would react when she found out about Jerry and his sudden break from reality. It was yet another mystery in Kyra's life, and she hated unsolved mysteries.

Glory's salon was in a chic and recently remodeled area of the French Quarter that was bustling with activity and traffic. She had to admit, when Glory had first mentioned opening the salon/spa, she'd been skeptical. Still, she was proud of the little place her friend had carved out for herself.

She found a parking spot and swung out of her vehicle. She hated delivering news like this to a friend. She opened the door to Sweet Glory and grimaced at the smell of chemicals. It must have been a heavy perm day.

"Kyra!"

Kyra bit back a sound of dismay as Glory's assistant manager penned her with a decisive eye. "Levi."

"Don't take that tone with me!" He shook his head and sighed. "Look at your skin."

"I promise I'll come in soon, and you can cover me head-to-toe in whatever you like." Kyra held out a hand as he approached. "Where is Glory?"

"In the back office." He twirled his finger in a circle, and Kyra obligingly spun around for him. "That ass is wasted on you, girl."

"Fuck you." Kyra laughed and shrugged out of her jacket.

She found Glory in her office, her eyes glued to a compu-station screen. "Does your employee insurance plan pay for ass implants? Levi's jealousy of mine could get out of hand."

Glory looked up from her figures and grinned. "Honey, we're all jealous of that ass."

Kyra tossed her jacket over the back of an empty chair beside Glory's desk. "Okay, so I'm just going to spit it out." She paused. "Jerry went loony last night in lockup and is at St. Martin's."

Glory sat back in her chair with a frown. "Really?"

"Really. He started screaming and coming out of his clothes."

"Wow." Glory shook her head. "You just never know how a body is going to react to jail."

"You aren't upset?"

Glory shrugged. "He used me and cheated on me. He's history."

"Good."

Glory looked over her face and then grinned. "Well, you got laid."

"I did not," Kyra denied, then laughed. "Okay, maybe I did. But *laid* is too tame a word to describe the experience."

"Who?"

"Alex Waters."

Glory's mouth dropped open briefly, then clamped shut. "That beautiful man who owns Still Waters? Christ, Kyra, that's so hot, *my* panties are wet." She fanned herself and blew out a breath.

"Yeah." Kyra sighed. "It was good."

"Chocolate cheesecake good?"

"Chocolate cheesecake with cherry topping good."

"Oh." Glory bit down on her lip. "I almost hate you."

"Yeah, I'd hate me, too." Kyra stood. "Want to have dinner?"

Glory tucked her legs up under her and leaned against the arm of Kyra's sofa. "Okay, so tell me what you're up to with Alex Waters."

"Sex."

"Just sex?"

"It's for the best, right?" Kyra sighed. "Hell, I don't know even know what I want. All I know is that whenever I look at him, my insides get all twisted up." She picked at her sweet-and-sour chicken with a pair of chopsticks and met Glory's gaze. "The man's a warrior in bed."

Glory chuckled. "I bet."

"I'm totally over my head with him. He isn't going to let me run all over him." She laughed at Glory's expression. "Don't frown at me. I mean it. Alex Waters isn't the sort of man that a woman can keep in a corner of her life. There is no way he's going to actually allow himself to be my 'dick on the side' for any serious length of time."

"You won't convince me that you'd be satisfied with a sexual relationship. You can pretend with others all you want, but I know damn well that you don't want to spend your life alone. You find Alex attractive, and we can safely assume that he's interested in you. The two of you can fuck yourselves silly for a while, but eventually you'll have to start talking about what you want."

"Sex doesn't have to be complicated."

"If it was just sex, you wouldn't step foot in his bar, and you sure as hell wouldn't have let him spend the night."

A wistful smile played on Kyra's lips as she thought about waking up with him. "It was nice waking up with someone."

"I know."

"Cops don't make good husbands or wives. It's been a bad bet since the first one donned a uniform."

"So? I didn't say you had to go marry the guy. But you *are* thirty-five years old."

"Hey, what's my age got to do with anything?" Kyra frowned. "You're only a year younger."

"Most women your age have picked out a life partner. You jump from man to man, flicking them off like flies when you're done with them. You are pure-to-the-bone man-eater, and I don't want you to get lost in that trap."

Kyra put her food down on the coffee table in front of her. "That's bullshit."

Glory laughed and ran her fingers through her short blonde hair. "You know it's not. I may be naïve, but you, you're hard and uncompromising. I guess I can be thankful you aren't an empty-headed debutante who flashes her money around. You know, I never figured you'd be a cop. Not with the plans your grandmother had for you after you became Miss New Orleans."

She shuddered visibly. "You know the woman planned to make sure I got all the way to Miss North American Union. Can you imagine? It's horrifying to even think about it."

"Is that why you passed the crown to the runner-up?"

Kyra snorted. "I kept the crown. They gave her a different one. It's in my collection with the others."

"Here?"

"No, in storage on my grandmother's estate." Kyra grabbed a bottle of water from the coffee table and took a deep drink. "Look, the thing is that I'm really enjoying Alex Waters. I don't know if I can take any more, but I also know that I would kick myself if I didn't let whatever we have play out. I want to know ..."

"Know what?"

She shrugged. "Everything. I want to know everything about him."

"Oh, girl, you got it bad."

Chapter Six

Kyra dropped her bag in the chair next to her desk and casually picked up her mail. She looked at Phil's empty desk and then out the open door of the office. The detective's area in the Major Crimes division looked about half-full, its usual state for a Friday morning. She tossed aside most of mail and focused on the small box that was still in her in-tray.

The box had a sticker on it, indicating it had already been inspected for explosives. She picked it up, ran her fingers over the sticker briefly, and picked up her letter opener to slice the tape away. The contents knocked against the box as she handled it.

Sitting down, she snagged her field kit from her bag and opened it. Nu-skin gloves slid easily on, and she carefully removed the secure-foam-wrapped object from the box and tossed the box on her desk as Phil entered. "Good morning."

"Morning. Getting presents at work?"

Ignoring the dread that gathered inside, she pulled the foam loose from the object. "I don't think this is going to count as a present."

"What the hell is that?"

Kyra set the clay jar down carefully and sat back in her chair. "It's a jar."

With some dread, she lifted the top off the jar and swallowed hard. It was full to the very rim with ash and broken bone chips.

"More to the point, it's a *govì*. Practitioners of Voodoo use it in rituals so they may connect with the spirits of their ancestors for counsel or for information about the future."

Phil moved closer and cleared his throat. "I'm not going to ask how you know that shit. You people down here are way too interested in Voodoo."

Kyra didn't respond. Instead, she reached into her field kit and pulled out a portable fingerprint scanner. The hum of the scanner and brisk red energy pattern on the jar was comforting. It was the only thing comforting about the entire situation.

"No prints." She stood and put the jar back in the box. "I'm going to take this to Parker. Did you get that list of tattoo parlors?"

"Yeah, citywide."

"Let's start with the ones in the French Quarter. We'll expand further out if we need to." She paused in the entryway of the office. "I'll call you when I'm finished with Parker."

With her "present" in the passenger seat, Kyra sat still behind the wheel while she considered the significance of the *govi*. The clay pots were used in Voodoo for communication, just as she'd told Phil, but they could also be vessels for spirits. She glanced at it briefly and took a deep breath. Getting spooked by an inanimate object was unacceptable. It would be easy to dump the thing in an evidence locker after the visit to the ME, but she couldn't.

She argued with herself for several seconds before engaging her comm-u and inputting Clara's number. "Clara, it's Inspector Moray."

"Inspector."

"The killer sent me a *govi*."

Silence followed, and then Clara cleared her throat. "Empty?"

"No. I'm pretty damn sure it's human bones and ashes. I'm on my way to the medical examiner's office."

"The offering shouldn't be ignored."

"I realize that," Kyra ground out through clenched teeth. "What do you suggest I do?"

"After you finish with the ME, bring the jar to me."

"Do you think he knows about my mother?"

"Your mother practiced Voodoo in full view of the public, and despite your public dislike for the religion, there are those who see you as part of the community."

That fucking sucked. Kyra closed her eyes. "As soon as I finish with Parker, I'll be on my way out to your place."

"Leave your partner in the city."

* * * * *

Kyra had indeed left her partner in the city, along with half the contents of the *govi*. When she pulled to a halt in front of Clara's house, she shot the scarecrow a look of pure misery. "You realize that she lives to thwart me."

Thankful that Clara's creepy yard decoration hadn't responded, she grabbed the jar and her bag as the door to the house opened. Clara stood there, seemingly patient, but Kyra could see the interest stirring in the old woman.

Kyra's mother had found Voodoo shortly after the birth of her only child. She'd followed the religion faithfully until one morning, in a desperate moment, Alicia Moray had taken her own life. Though Kyra didn't blame the religion for her mother's suicide, a part of her would never understand what had drawn her mother to the primitive religion instead of a psychologist or medical doctor who could have treated her depression.

She followed Clara silently into the house and back to her office, where she set the jar down and took a seat across from the woman. "He's baiting me."

"No." Clara shook her head and ran her fingers carefully over the clay's smooth surface. "He views you as something more than his victims. There are at least two now."

"Yeah." Kyra glanced at the jar and wondered if she'd ever know whom he'd burned for the gift. "*Govi* are sometimes used to hold a spirit?"

Clara nodded and turned the clay pot carefully in her hands. "No spirit lingers here, but then, you knew that, didn't you? The moment you touched it, you knew it held nothing more than ash and bone. You are a powerful woman, Kyra. Like your mother, you wield a natural grace and a unique strength. I know your memories of Voodoo begin and end with your mother's suicide ... but if you can set that aside for a moment ..."

"Set it aside?"

"Tell me about the trophy he's taking."

"He's taking skin, tattooed skin. The stepbrother told us that Donna had a tattoo of a small green-eyed cat on her shoulder."

"You think he viewed the painted animal as her *veve*, a representation of her spirit." Clara inclined her head and looked toward Kyra with curious eyes.

"Yes."

"He stole her soul."

"He killed it first." Kyra stood from the chair. "He gave her enough belladonna to kill her, yet he poured water into her lungs and drowned her before the poison could kill her."

"*Verser*, the ritual pouring water on the *loa*. Killed her spirit, then her body, and then cleansed both."

Loa, the spirit. Kyra fought back a shudder.

"Yes, he bathed her. He might have also shaved her."

"Purified her body and soul for the afterlife. She left the world as she came into it." Clara grimaced. "You know what he is, right?"

"A sick fuck."

Clara laughed, and Kyra turned to her with surprise. "Indeed. He is a sick individual. I don't believe he is a true practitioner of Voodoo. He has some knowledge and experience, though, probably cultivated more out of curiosity than calling. He's dangerous to you."

"Not as dangerous as I am to him," Kyra retorted. "I won't have him use my mother against me."

"This gift to you is an indication that he's focused on you."

"I understand that." She sat back down across from her. "You said I needed to set aside my feelings about your religion."

Clara raised an eyebrow. "Your mother was a talented practitioner of the art and had a great deal of natural potential. Potential that you have, as well."

"I've told you once before that I won't involve myself in your religion."

"Voodoo didn't kill your mother."

"No, but if she had turned to a legitimate source of aid, she might not have killed herself."

"As you've always said." Clara looked at *govi*. "How does this thing make you feel, Inspector?"

Kyra didn't respond for a moment. With a heavy sigh, she rubbed her face. "I dreaded looking inside the thing. I didn't want to touch it. I still don't want to touch it."

"It's the evil that drifts over it that makes you fear it." Clara stood and left the room abruptly. She returned with a simple cloth sack, into which she put the *govi* and then drew it closed with strings. "Keep it in this until you put in with the other evidence. It will help shield you from it."

"How many shops in the area cater to *voodooisants*?"

"Amateur practitioners of the religion could find most of the supplies they need in any tourist shop in the French Quarter. However, this *govi* was made by hand. His hand."

* * * * *

Kyra walked into Still Waters and immediately looked toward the bar for Alex, but he wasn't there. She sighed and looked around for Phil. She found him in a booth, mulling over a glossy red-covered menu. She knew why she'd chosen Still Waters for lunch, and it was not a source of comfort. Needing to see someone wasn't new, but admitting it was gut-clenching.

She slid into the booth in front of Phil and looked around. "Hey."

"Hey. How did things go with the Voodoo queen?"

Kyra shrugged. "She thinks he sent me the clay jar as some sort of romantic overture."

Phil snorted. "When I was single, flowers did the job just fine."

Kyra grinned as she remembered the rose that Alex had sent her. She looked toward the bar and found his brother staring at her, hard. She frowned, then looked at Phil. "What did you decide to eat?"

"Grilled chicken salad."

She nodded and slid out of the booth. "Get me one, too. French dressing."

Long-legged and relaxed strides took her to the bar. She met Marcus's gaze. "Where's Alex?"

"His office." He looked at Phil. "Who's the suit?"

"I'm not fucking you, Marcus." She inclined her head. "That makes that suit none of your business."

He grabbed her arm as she moved around him. "My little brother is very much my business."

Kyra was silent as she gauged Marcus's anger. Realizing that it didn't take much for him to distrust a woman, she pulled her arm from his grasp. "Be careful. I wouldn't be above putting you on your fine ass."

"Are you two about to kill each other, or contemplating running away together?" Alex moved to, and then between, them. "What's up with my cop?"

"I'm going to kick your brother's ass."

Alex looked at him, then Kyra. "Well, that should be interesting. Is that Phil?"

"Yeah."

"Think I'll go say hi. No blood." He kissed Kyra's mouth and walked away.

Marcus watched his brother go to the table, then focused on Kyra. "Your partner?"

"At the moment."

"You could have just said."

"You don't get to sit in judgment of me, Marcus." She poked him in the chest.

He grabbed her hand and held it tight. "I apologize."

"Fuck off." She pulled her fingers free and glared at him when he laughed. "Arrogant bastard."

"It's my worst fault."

Kyra rolled her eyes and walked away. Some fault. That sort of single-minded devotion to the people he loved was just plain amazing and beautiful. She still felt like she could punch him in the face. Alex slid from the booth as she arrived, and tucked her in before sitting back down.

"Leave him in one piece?"

"He's still useful." Kyra caught up her water glass and took a deep drink. "So, what happened with the tattoo parlors?"

Phil glanced briefly at Alex and then looked at his p-pc. "Three of the five that I visited only do cash transactions. I wasn't able to trace Donna's credit account to any establishment of that kind in the last two years. Most of her money went to school and food."

"What about the cat itself?"

"No one could remember putting anything like that on a female Donna's age. But then, from William, we can assume the tattoo was gotten during or right after Mardi Gras. I doubt we'll be able to trace it that way."

"Maybe she didn't purchase it."

They both turned to look at Alex. Kyra focused on him. "What do you mean?"

"A tattoo is a sexy, elemental thing. It's usually gotten as some sort of affirmation of personal achievement, a token of a relationship, or perhaps she was talked into getting it by a friend, peer pressure." Alex pulled her straw free of paper and stuck in it her glass.

Phil looked toward Kyra. "I could call in and get a warrant for Killian's bank records."

"No judge will give us that without more. Why don't you hunt him down after lunch and ask him if he bought her the tattoo."

"The first-level background check came back on Samuel Killian and William LaRoux. They're both clean, relatively speaking. LaRoux had a few problems in high school but nothing that actually led to an arrest. Killian has no history of criminal behavior, minor or otherwise."

"Put in a request for a second-level check on both of them. I want to know if they have any sealed records."

Phil nodded, grinning as the waitress approached with the salads. "Okay. No murder talk while I eat."

"So, what did you and Kyra tangle about?"

Marcus continued washing the bar in front of him. "She's a hard-ass, Alex."

"Yeah, she certainly is." Alex looked back to the table where she sat with her partner. They'd abandoned their food shortly before he'd left them. "Lots of cop talk going on over there."

"I asked her who the suit was, and she told me to fuck off."

Alex laughed. "Well, that sounds like her." He shook his head. "I'm a grown-up, Marcus. I can take care of myself."

"I'll try to remember that."

"Don't worry about Kyra; she's tough, but she's honest. She might not live by the standard set of rules ... but I knew up front what I was getting into." Alex watched his brother move around the bar and then stood.

He went to his office after one glance in Kyra's direction.

Kyra pushed open the door of Alex's office and paused as she realized Alex was on a call. She listened to him arranging delivery of food. He looked up and motioned her inside. Closing the door, she strolled to his desk and propped herself up on the corner.

He ended the call and met her gaze. "You're working something pretty nasty, aren't you?"

Kyra shrugged. "There's nothing about murder that isn't nasty, no matter the circumstances."

"Yeah." He took one of her hands and rubbed her fingers gently. "I never thought about the fact that cops have to deal with murder."

"Most don't like to."

Alex nodded and then released her hand. "I'll see you tonight."

"I'll be here with bells on."

He grinned, looking her over. "That has potential."

Kyra leaned forward and placed a kiss on his lips. "I'll probably get here around seven."

Touching her hair, he nodded. "Good."

Kyra settled down in her seat and jerked her safety harness on. "You have something to say?"

Phil shrugged, reddening. "I didn't realize you were seeing anyone."

"Ah, you shouldn't believe the locker-room talk." She started the engine and then glanced at him briefly. "Many of the older men in the department still don't think a woman belongs on the job. The other side of the fence is that women should ride a desk. Both sides of that argument think that a woman who doesn't date other cops is probably gay."

Phil laughed. "Shit, sorry."

"Yeah, it's okay. I don't date other cops ... no matter their district or their rank."

"I don't blame you. One badge is enough for any relationship." Phil cleared his throat. "You realize that you might get grief about ..."

"Yeah, I realize that he's black." She looked at Phil for a moment, then shrugged. "I've never made decisions about my personal life based on what a few backward people in our society think. It's really fucking sad that nearly three hundred years after the end of slavery, we still have issues like this."

"Hate doesn't disappear because technology advances." Phil shrugged. "Society only progresses as far as its weakest members. We still deal with racism and sexism because, collectively as a society, we've never made an effort to get rid of it."

Kyra nodded and sighed. "So, the tattoo is going to turn into a dead end at this point. I'd like to start looking at sex offenders in the area."

“She wasn’t raped.”

“No, but the bathing, shaving, and the insertion of something in the oral cavity suggest sexual undertones.” Kyra’s gaze scanned the traffic around them. “We need to look at sexual offenders who haven’t elevated to sexual assault.”

“Peeping, stalking, breaking and entering, etc.”

“Yeah. Also, look at any home invasions for sexual misconduct that didn’t result in rape. We are, at the moment, looking for a white male between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five.”

“You don’t think he’s a rapist.”

“He’s not a rapist *yet*.” Kyra frowned. “He’ll get there if we let him stay on the streets long enough. The quality of the crime speaks of planning, thoughtful preparation, and a deliberate methodology that can’t be dismissed.”

“Do you believe in evil?”

“I believe there is no limit to the viciousness that one human being can inflict on another. Insanity is often mistaken for evil.”

“Do you think he’s a serial predator?”

Kyra swung into her parking spot and looked at him. “Yes.” She turned and looked at him. “I think he’ll kill until we catch him.”

He nodded mutely and opened the door to the vehicle. She watched him close the door and go into the station with a thoughtful gaze. Deep down, she knew he wasn’t cut out for Major Crimes and that eventually he would realize it, too. Reaching back, she took the box that held the covered *govi* off the backseat. Holding it was still slightly unnerving, but she was determined not to let the killer get the best of her. He would get nothing he wanted from her.

“So, the ashes are human.”

“Without a doubt.” Jeffrey Parker tipped back in his chair and looked around the conference room. “The jar itself is common and can be bought from hundreds of stores in the state, and surrounding states as well.”

“The victim?”

“There is nothing usable in the ashes.”

Kyra grimaced and then looked at the *govi* again. She hated just being in the same room with it. It was time to put the damn thing in with the rest of the evidence. “Clara indicated the *govi* itself serves as a vessel for the soul. Also, she believes the water he drowned Donna with was part of a water-pouring ritual.”

“A vial of bone dust and a *govi* full of human ashes.” Commander Ethan Baker grimaced. “Two victims.”

"At least two victims." Kyra stood. "I think we can safely assume that he has already chosen his next victim. We don't know how long he'll wait between victims." She went to the work board where she'd placed Donna LaRoux's picture. "Donna was a normal, angst-filled teenager. She had a complicated social calendar, a mother who was entirely too invested in her, and ambitions that went beyond what anyone in her family wanted for her."

"There had to be something special about her."

Kyra nodded. "Yes. There was something special about her. Whether it was the tattooed flesh he took or something else, we may never know."

Phil leaned forward and cleared his throat. "He sent you the *goví*. He wants to make this personal."

"I've had some high-profile cases in the past few years." Kyra looked back to Donna LaRoux's picture. "But this case hasn't hit the papers, yet. Which means that he was at the first scene. He knew I'd been assigned Donna's murder."

"He could have a police scanner."

Kyra grimaced. "Yeah." She frowned and then shook her head. "No, he was there. He watched her be discovered and watched us work the scene. There was no need to establish such an elaborate dumpsite if he wasn't going to be around to see the reaction. His work had to be admired."

"Admired?" Phil asked, clearly disgusted.

"It may not be our idea of art, but it is certainly his."

Kyra walked back to Donna's picture as her commander ended the meeting and dismissed the others in the room.

She didn't say a word until the room cleared and the door was shut. "I'm going to need a new partner, sir."

"I know."

"He's not a bad cop, but he's not cut out for murder. He's not sleeping, probably having nightmares. The last case we caught was horrid. Hell, even I woke up a few nights with the sweats. He still hasn't recovered. Catching another female victim so soon just drove it home for him."

"You think he's solid?"

"He's great for details, relates well to witnesses. He's too corn-fed to be a dirty cop. To be honest, I'm surprised he made sergeant without getting a little more tough-skinned. I don't know if he knew that his last partner was dirty."

"Just another brick in the blue wall."

"Perhaps." Kyra looked back to Donna's picture. "I don't think the *goví* was just a token gift. It has meaning to him; the ashes represent something special, or maybe someone special."

“You think the ashes are his first victim?”

“I don’t know.” Kyra threw up her hands. “Shit, if we get another body, we should consider asking for a fed.”

“You realize the mayor would frown on the sort of media attention that would generate.”

Kyra snorted; she knew why. “Oh, he can shove that. If a second body comes up, the press will get wind of it, and then the whole damn city will know we have a serial killer out there.”

Phil was sitting at his desk when she came into the office. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days. She wondered how long he would suffer in silence, but after a moment’s thought decided that she wasn’t going to wait to find out.

She sat down at her desk and then looked at him. “How long have you been having nightmares?”

“About two months.”

“When were you going to tell me?”

“I hadn’t planned on telling you at all.” He looked down at his desk and then grimaced. “Thought I’d go to the commander and ask for a transfer. I didn’t know how long I needed to wait ...”

“Approach him first thing in the morning.” Kyra looked down at her desk. “It will be much better for your career if you request it before he does it on his own.”

* * * * *

She was wearing blue, and from the looks of the dress, not much else. The thin silk drifted over her body, outlining firm breasts and a near-hourglass figure that made his mouth water. The thin spaghetti straps that held the dress on her shoulders were like an invitation to undress her.

“Well, your cop doesn’t look like much of a cop now.”

Alex laughed. “Indeed.”

Kyra met his gaze and smiled briefly before she turned to her left. Glory James hurried to her side with a drink in hand and gave Alex a jaunty wave.

“Friend’s not bad, either.”

Alex looked at his brother. “I thought you were supposed to be playing this gig?”

Marcus grinned and took his water bottle as he slid from the booth. “Have fun.”

Kyra slid into the booth as Marcus slipped away and Glory bounced in on the other side.

"Happy Birthday!" Glory scooted around and kissed him right on the mouth. She sat back and regarded him. "You have a great mouth."

"Back off." Kyra shooed her good-naturedly.

She giggled and scooted away.

"Thanks." He watched Kyra pick up his water. "It may take some work to top that birthday wish; it's the best one I've had all day."

She grinned. "We'll just have to see." Kyra looked around the bar and then back to Alex. "Is this what you call an intimate gathering of your friends?"

"Well, I like to have big parties." He ran his hand along her shoulder and looked over her face. "Nice dress."

She leaned closer and kissed his lips softly. "I'd love to say I bought it for you, but I didn't."

He pulled her closer, his gaze focused on her lips. "A kind woman would, at least, dance with me."

"I'm not a kind woman." She touched his lips with the tips of her fingers. "But I'll dance with you anyway."

Sliding out of the booth, she waited for him to join her and offered Glory a wink. Glory grinned and took a big sip of her drink.

The dance floor wasn't very crowded, but it hardly mattered. Kyra was already lost in him when he pulled her close and slid one arm around her waist. The music was slow and sexy, like most good jazz was, in Kyra's opinion. She glanced at his brother and then settled her gaze back on Alex.

Alex let his hands move on her back and wondered why in the hell he'd thought he wanted a big-ass birthday party. Then he remembered that he'd planned the thing before he'd met Kyra. It hardly felt like he'd only known her a few days. Feeling in over his head, he pulled her closer and sighed when she tucked her face close to his neck.

Her body drifted against his with the music, and he forced thoughts of sex aside. The last thing he needed to do was get a raging hard-on. The thought of dealing with that sort of situation in his place cooled him considerably. She was soft and pliable in his arms. It was hard to mesh her current disposition with the tough-ass cop he knew her to be.

She turned her head and placed a soft kiss on his neck, and his knees grew weak for a moment. Lord, he was in over his head. He cast a glance toward the stage and found Marcus grinning. His predicament must be written all over his face. Alex closed his eyes briefly and pulled her closer. Just one night in the woman's bed, and he'd been reduced to mush.

Kyra lifted her head and looked over his face. "Something wrong?"

"No." He shook his head and kissed her forehead.

He hadn't had a crush on a woman since he was eighteen. The thought was uncomfortable as hell, but it was the only term that seemed to fit. He looked around the bar and grimaced as he caught sight of John Deets. John waved at him hesitantly, and Kyra stiffened in his arms.

"Relax. I'll take care of it."

Kyra frowned at him. "Alex."

"Go back to the table and scare off the guy hitting on Glory. I'll take care of it."

She cast a disparaging glance in John's direction but went off to rescue her friend. Alex moved through the crowd quickly, and with a decisive nod told John to follow him. Their walk back to his office served to cool Alex off completely; another strike against John.

He shut the door as John took a seat in a chair in front of his desk. "I thought we agreed that you wouldn't come back here, John."

John cleared his throat. "You called the fucking VA on me."

"I informed the VA that a fellow veteran might benefit from counseling. I think it would be in your best interest to let them help you." Alex sat down at his desk and let out a deep breath.

"I don't need the VA mucking with my life," John snapped.

"You should have considered that before you brought a gun into my place. You have behavior that needs to be checked. There are several ways we can do that. One way is to see a doctor; the other is for me to file charges against you. I honestly don't think you'd be served by time in a correctional facility."

"Was that the cop you were dancing with?"

"Yeah."

"Nice. She almost looks human without a gun." John stared at the floor briefly and then met Alex's gaze. "I loved him. I never wanted to admit that he made a mistake."

"It's hard to watch someone we love do something that will get them killed. He was like a brother to me, John. I do understand."

"He wasn't like a brother to me."

"It wasn't a secret that you were lovers," Alex murmured. "It was obvious."

John looked up, startled. "We thought we did a good job of hiding it."

"I doubt anyone outside the unit knew."

"Yeah." He looked around the office. "So, how old are you, anyways?"

"Thirty-one."

John cleared his throat. "I guess you forgot to take me off the list at the door."

Alex laughed, because he had. He'd completely forgotten that he'd invited John and several others from his unit. "Yeah, I guess I did."

"The cop looked like she had her panties in a twist."

Alex laughed. "She doesn't trust you."

"I guess I didn't make the best first impression."

"No." Alex stood. "Come on, you can stay. Just don't hit on any obviously straight guys, and your drink limit is two."

Kyra gave Alex a practiced glare as he slid back into the booth. "You're letting him stay."

"Yeah."

Frustrated, but hard-pressed to push him, she looked toward the stage. She didn't like John Deets being so close to Alex. True, she'd taken his gun. At least, she'd taken one gun from him. Resolved that in the morning she would find out if he had any other weapons registered in his name, she looked toward the dance floor where Glory was dancing with a man who bordered on being "girl" pretty. She always went for the pretty boys.

"Suppose it's none of my business."

"He's an old friend, Kyra. John has problems, and I need to make sure he gets the help he needs."

"Yeah."

Kyra grimaced. There was no fucking way she'd ever understand men. If she had a friend who had brandished a gun at her, said friend would have had one chance to make a clean and complete getaway before being stomped into the ground.

"It pisses you off."

She shrugged. "He's your friend. I don't have an opinion."

"Yep, your non-opinion is written all over your face."

Kyra sucked on her straw and frowned when she realized that her glass was empty. She set it aside and turned to look at Alex. "I didn't sign on to get embroiled in your personal life. We're both here for the sex, right?"

"So you keep saying."

"Then I don't have an opinion that should matter to you." She glanced at Glory and then at her comm-u. "I should go."

He slid out of the booth without a word and didn't touch her as she followed. Kyra looked at Glory, who had taken the look on Kyra's face to mean that they were leaving and quickly disengaged from her dance partner.

Chapter Seven

Kyra shoved her vehicle into drive and glanced at Glory. "I'm sorry."

Glory shrugged. "Turn on the radio so I can listen to all the crime in the big, bad city."

She flipped on the scanner and focused on the road. "I'm not going to tell you what all the codes mean, so don't ask."

"No worries. I looked them up on the Internet."

"Why are men so damn complicated?"

"Oh, hun." Glory shook her head. "Men aren't complicated; women just make too much out of their little behavioral issues."

Kyra rolled her eyes. She knew damn well that in Alex's case it wasn't just a behavioral issue. Men had a weird set of rules when it came to their friends and their enemies. "Do you want to get some food?"

"Yeah, you look like you need it."

Sighing, Kyra pulled into the nearest restaurant and was startled to find herself in the parking lot of Valteau's. She hadn't eaten there since she'd caught Donna LaRoux's murder. With a sigh, she killed the engine.

"I'm sorry. You were having a good time at the party."

"Yeah, but you weren't, so it's cool." Glory pulled her purse out of the glove box and grinned at Kyra. "Let's go eat our weight in cheese sticks and fries."

Kyra nodded, resigned.

* * * * *

Fighting the urge to unbuckle her safety harness, Kyra sat back in her seat and watched Glory disappear into her apartment building. She turned the sound on the scanner up to fill in the silence her friend had left behind. Groaning a little, she put the vehicle into drive and wished she hadn't eaten that last order of cheese sticks.

The chatter on the scanner was almost relaxing, which was odd since she'd heard three domestic disturbance calls and one suspicious person in a residential neighborhood since she'd put the vehicle in drive.

Her comm-u buzzed slightly, but she ignored it. She'd turned off the automatic engage shortly before she'd entered the bar, and now she was in no mood to talk to anyone.

"We have a 10-54, location Still Waters, 302 St. Anne Street."

Kyra's fingers hesitated over the answer button on her steering wheel briefly before she pushed it to respond. "Inspector Kyra Moray en route. 10-7 on location."

"Location Still Waters, 302 St. Anne Street." Location confirmed; someone had died in Still Waters.

Sucking in a deep breath, Kyra tried not to imagine what she was going to find when she got there. She should have made sure that John Deets hadn't had a second weapon registered. Two hours had passed since she'd left the bar in a snit.

She double-parked next to a police cruiser and pulled her badge out of her purse before exiting her vehicle. Looping the chain over her neck, she barely acknowledged the officer at the door as he stepped aside to allow her entrance. The place was like a tomb; all the chatter and sexy music was gone. She scanned the silent crowd as she walked across the room. Alex and his brother sat in the booth they'd shared earlier in the evening, along with John Deets.

"Constable Salanti."

Ana Salanti straightened immediately. "Inspector Moray, nice dress."

Kyra blushed. "What's the situation?"

"I tried you on your comm-u ..." Ana motioned toward a doorway. "The owner asked for you when he put in the 911." Both women turned and looked briefly at Alex. "I put him in the booth with his brother to keep him out of the way."

Kyra followed the officer through a staff area; the kitchen had been emptied, as well. The back door to Still Waters stood open, and Kyra swallowed. "Do we have a name on the victim?"

"Janie Monroe. She was a waitress on staff here."

Kyra brushed past the officer. The scene was a near duplicate of Donna LaRoux's. Except for the fact that Janie Monroe was African American. It wasn't time to set all of her preconceived notions aside, but she had no choice other than to re-evaluate what she thought about the killer and how he would proceed.

She asked one of the crime scene techs for a pair of gloves and slid them on as she walked toward the body. The patch skin missing from the victim's upper thigh was a prime location for a tattoo.

"I want Parker here."

"He's on his way, ma'am."

Kyra carefully slipped her fingers into Janie Monroe's mouth and pulled out an intricately carved coffin. "Alabaster."

"What is it?" Ana Salanti squatted down beside her.

"It's a coffin. A token of Voodoo." She dropped the coffin in the evidence bag that Ana held out automatically. "No one touches her until Parker gets here. Make sure the alley is sealed off really well."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who discovered the body?"

"The owner's brother, Marcus Waters."

"Salanti, you start organizing the statements from the crowd. Release no one without getting all of their information. Request a few more uniforms so we can get them out of here as soon as possible, and have dispatch wake the commander."

Kyra walked back into the bar and glared at an officer lounging against the bar. "When you are finished with your break, Constable, perhaps you can help get this crowd processed."

The officer straightened immediately. "Yes, ma'am."

Kyra walked to the booth and looked at John Deets. "Mr. Deets, give the officer at the door your statement and your contact information." He hopped up and left immediately under her silent gaze. Sitting down, she folded her hands in front of her. "Okay, Marcus, tell me."

"I'd taken about three breaks in the alley. Not exactly the freshest air in the city, but better than being out front."

"When was the last time either one of you saw Janie Monroe on the floor waiting tables?"

"She didn't work tonight," Alex answered.

Startled, Kyra was silent for a minute, and then she looked toward the corner where the rest of the staff was huddled. "I see."

"I went out there around nine-thirty p.m., saw the body, and came in to tell Alex. He called the police."

"Did either one of you touch the body?"

Alex nodded. "I checked her pulse, but just her wrist. She looked dead, but I had to be sure ... I know that sounds stupid."

"No, not stupid. Certainly human, but not stupid." Glancing at Marcus, she raised an eyebrow.

"I didn't touch her. Frankly, I was so startled by it that I don't even remember coming back inside."

"The position and the display were supposed to be shocking. You wouldn't be normal if it didn't affect you." Kyra slid from the booth and met Alex's gaze. "I'll need you to give prints and a DNA swab so we can eliminate anything you might have left on her body."

"Yeah."

Kyra watched Jeffrey Parker at work with reluctant admiration. He might be a pain in the ass, but he was very good at his job. He had the techs jumping, and she felt secure that he wouldn't miss anything.

"Inspector."

She stiffened and straightened as her commander emerged from the bar and into the alley. "Sir."

"Nice dress."

Kyra frowned and focused on the body. "I didn't have time to change."

"Noticed." He walked to the body and glanced around the alley. "He likes alleyways."

"Secluded," Jeffrey Parker muttered.

"Have you confirmed that the skin he took had a tattoo on it?"

Kyra shook her head. "We're looking for next of kin."

"It was a dolphin."

Kyra turned to the doorway and saw Alex. "A dolphin?"

"Yeah. She showed everyone on staff when she got it."

"During Mardi Gras."

Alex looked at her, startled. "Yes, as a matter of fact."

Kyra grimaced and walked to the body. "Was she seeing anyone?"

"I don't let the employees bring their partners into the bar. The waitstaff is encouraged to appear available but unattainable." Alex dropped his gaze to Janie and frowned. "She was twenty-four years old."

"Get with Constable Salanti and relate everything you know about the victim and her relationship with the other employees in the bar."

Alex nodded and abruptly left the doorway.

Kyra re-entered Still Waters. Alex and Marcus stood by the bar. The place was empty. Both men turned to her as she approached. "I'll need formal statements from you both tomorrow."

"Yeah."

She met Alex's gaze and shook her head. "Not a good birthday, Mr. Waters."

"Yeah." Alex grimaced.

"We're going to need the invitation list -- to make sure we have everyone's statement."

"Constable Salanti already got a list of everyone who came through the door tonight, including staff and the band."

"Since he didn't pull her out of the bar, we can assume he was never in here." She put her hand on the bar to center herself. "We can also assume that she was dumped as she was so Marcus would be the one to find her. He probably watched you enter and leave the bar a few times this evening."

"Sick fuck."

"Yeah, he is." She looked over Marcus's face and saw the anger and the sadness there. "I doubt she suffered."

"He cut on her," Alex snapped.

"After she was dead."

"You don't seem surprised, Inspector." Marcus focused intently on her face and waited for a response.

"Janie isn't the first." She looked over her shoulder as her commander entered the bar. "You can come in together, but you'll have to be questioned separately. I'm asking you not to discuss your versions of the events. You saw different things tonight; discussing it could only cloud your perceptions."

"Inspector Moray?"

Kyra turned and met Ana Salanti's gaze. "Yes?"

"While canvassing the neighborhood ..." She cleared her throat. "I found this on your apartment door."

Kyra took the evidence bag and flipped it over in her hands so she could read the writing on the paper. She grimaced and handed it to the commander, who had stopped beside her.

Ethan Baker reddened with anger and then looked at the officer. "Did her neighbors see anything?"

"No. There are only six other residents in Inspector Moray's building, and none of them noticed anything out of the ordinary."

Kyra watched her commander with the plastic-covered note and realized that he'd reached the same conclusion she had. "We knew he was aware of me already. The box sent to the station was sent to me directly."

"I don't like this."

"Well, trust me, letters from a psychotic aren't high on my list, either." Kyra took the note from him when he offered it, and walked toward the back door of the bar. "I'm going to go with Parker back to the ME's office."

"You might consider dropping by your apartment to change."

Kyra turned and looked at Constable Salanti with a narrowed gaze. "Excuse me, Constable?"

"It just occurs to me the boys at the ME's office might appreciate your current state of dress more than would be appropriate, ma'am."

Kyra grimaced; she'd forgotten. "Fine. Officer, you get to ride with the body."

Ana frowned and trudged off to find the ME. "See if I remind you you're half-naked again."

Laughing, she waited until Ana had exited the building. She turned to Ethan. "I think I'll keep her."

"She's inexperienced."

"She'll learn. She's up for the sergeant's test in two months, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then Ana Salanti will do." Kyra checked her comm-u for the time and then turned to the commander. "I want a set of street cops on this place for the next twenty-four hours."

"Sounds good. It'll be doing double-duty."

"I don't need a watchdog on my door."

"Didn't ask, Inspector. I'll take care of the notification."

"Sir?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Inspector, you've put in twenty-two hours in two days. You're off duty until eight a.m."

Kyra glared as her boss walked away. She waited until he'd strolled out the front door of the bar before she crossed her arms over her chest. "Arrogant bastard."

"Seems like arrogance is a trait most cops share."

Kyra sent Marcus a look and then focused on Alex. "Genetics is the only thing saving his ass."

Alex slid off the stool. "Why don't I walk you to your apartment?"

Kyra shrugged. "Just don't go touching me in front of the other cops. I have a reputation to protect."

Kyra dropped her keys and purse on the table in the foyer of her apartment and turned to Alex. "Tell me you didn't escort me home on the off chance the psycho was waiting in my apartment."

"Of course not." He shut the door and walked to her. "I came with you because I wanted to do this." Lowering his mouth to hers, he gathered her in his arms and pulled her to him.

She opened her mouth to his exploring tongue and curled her fingers into his shirt. His mouth lifted from hers briefly before he brushed his lips over hers again. "Alexander."

"I know you don't have time for me at the moment." He ran his hands down her back and pulled her closer.

"I don't."

He held her a moment longer, then released her. "I didn't expect to see that. When Marcus came in and told me there was a dead body in the alley ... hell, I thought I'd find a homeless person. They tend to hover in my alley. I always give the leftover food from the night out in doggy bags."

Kyra watched him walk into her living room. "That's a good thing to do."

"Well, it certainly won't solve the problem of starvation in this country." He sat down and rubbed his face. "You might as well know, before Janie worked at Still Waters, we had a brief entanglement."

"Entanglement."

"We had a sexual arrangement that lasted about six months. It was a mutually beneficial relationship that ended when she took a job in my bar."

"She wasn't bitter?"

"No, she had a kid to support and needed a good, steady job where she'd be safe ..." He clenched his jaw and looked away from her. "From what I overheard, this killer seems to be very interested in you."

"No more than I am in him." Kyra resisted the urge to sit down beside him. "I need to change. Come into the bedroom with me."

Alex stood and followed along gamely behind her. "This guy ... he's a serial killer?"

"That is a distinction that he endeavors to earn."

Kyra slid the dress down her body and tossed it on the bed as she pushed off her sandals. She was wearing a tiny dark blue g-string that made Alex briefly forget how to breathe. Pulling out a more sensible pair of panties, she discarded the thong and went to the closet for jeans.

"This is related to the murder at Valteau's."

"I'm sure it will be linked in the press tomorrow. We managed to keep the murder at Valteau's mostly under wraps. We won't be so lucky with the one at Still Waters. Your place was packed full of people, and having a woman murdered during your brother's performance will be just the dramatic angle some lucky reporter needs." She pulled a shirt out of the closet.

"Janie was a decent woman. She worked hard, played hard when she could, and didn't take more than she deserved."

Kyra turned to him as she pulled on her bra and fastened it. "I'm on her side, Alex. Whatever your past relationship with her, I'm on her side. He won't get away with it."

"Good."

Kyra walked to him as he sat down on her bed. "I need you to close Still Waters for at least twenty-four hours."

"Yeah, no problem."

"Don't answer questions when the press calls. I'm going to release a statement as soon as I can." She let him pull her close, and then she sighed. "Happy birthday."

"Yeah." He laughed sadly.

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-one."

Kyra met his gaze. "You realize that I'm four years older than you."

"Doesn't bother me."

It really didn't bother her, either. "This is one of those times, Alex, when you're going to regret being involved with me. I don't have time to coddle and comfort you."

He grinned. "I don't need coddling, Inspector. I'm a grown man. I'll just split a bottle of good scotch with Marcus."

Taking his face in both of her hands, she leaned down and kissed his forehead, then his lips. "You'll start to think the only memory you'll ever have of her is that moment in the alley when you realized who she was. It isn't true; it'll pass with time. It may always be your most vivid memory, but it won't be the only one. Images of her happy and alive will come back to you, I promise."

"I see her when I close my eyes."

"I know." She pulled him to her and tightened her arms around him when he pressed his face between her breasts.

They stayed that way for a long moment, and then he lifted his head. "Okay, so maybe I do need a little coddling."

Laughing softly, she stroked her hand over his head and leaned down to kiss him. The kiss deepened but remained gentle. When she lifted her head, Kyra found herself sighing. "I need to go."

“Your commander told you come in at eight.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t go down to the ME’s office and get a jump on things.”

Alex chuckled. “It’s a good thing you’re good at what you do; otherwise, I’m sure he’d be hard-pressed not to tear a strip off your ass on a daily basis.”

“You have to be extra good at what you do if you have an attitude problem.”

“I’d like to come along.”

She backed up a little and met his gaze. His expression was serious and focused. “Alex.”

“I won’t get in the way.”

“An ME’s office is not a pleasant place. There is little dignity left for the dead.”

“There is no dignity in death,” he corrected. “In life, yes, but not in death.”

She had to agree, and after a moment she nodded. “Okay, fine.”

The medical examiner’s building was across from Police Plaza; since it was nearly one a.m., the area could have been a study in chaos. A steady stream of traffic was exiting and entering the parking lot when they arrived. Kyra pulled into a spot and looked at Alex.

“Don’t give me that look. I’ll be fine. I’ve probably seen a hell of a lot more death than you have.”

She grimaced at that and assumed he was right. “You were in the armed forces during the last war with North Korea.”

“Yes.”

Kyra opened the door without another word and exited the vehicle. Alex Waters was a big complication in her life, and for the first time in a long time she wasn’t actually displeased by that. It could be the physical attraction, but she didn’t think so. She’d gotten her panties wet enough over the years to know that her attraction to him was different and new.

He walked beside her in silence as she input her passcode and entered the ME’s office. It was another place that smelled too clean, too sterile for what it was. The storage units and stasis fields kept the smell of death away, and in some ways that seem to cut the edge off the place. Kyra figured that murder cops needed to smell the dead once in a while. They needed the reminder.

They found Jeffrey Parker in exam room three with the body of Donna LaRoux. Constable Ana Salanti was at a table going through Donna’s possessions.

“Where’s Janie Monroe?”

Jeffrey raised his head and lifted the plastic shield from his face. “Since we’re now certain what we’re dealing with, I wanted to spend a few more hours with Donna’s body so I’ll have as much data as possible to compare.”

Kyra nodded and looked at Ana. “Constable Salanti.”

“Inspector Moray, I’ve been going over the victim’s personal items. What we found in her locker at Valteau’s and what we pulled from her bedroom at the LaRoux house. Nothing sticks out.”

“Good.”

“Except this.” Ana held up a lapel holo-button with the mayor’s face on it.

“A lot of people have those silly little buttons. It’s an election year.”

“Yeah, except Donna LaRoux wouldn’t have been old enough to vote for another two years, well after the mayor’s race.”

“Good.” Kyra nodded and walked over to the desk. “Make a note about that in the evidence log.”

“She could have gotten it from a customer.”

“Yeah, she could have. We can check to see if any of the other waitresses have the election buttons.” Kyra picked up the button and chuckled when the mayor’s face animated. His slogan flashed, and then his smiling face reappeared. “He reminds me of the mayor of Munchkinland.”

“Who?” Ana asked puzzled.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never seen *The Wizard of Oz*.”

“Okay, I won’t.” Ana took the button back when Kyra held it out to her.

Kyra shook her head in wonder and turned to look at the two men in the room. Parker had gone back to work, and Alex was standing on the opposite side of the body, watching the process. She walked over and put her hand on his shoulder as she came to a stop by his side. “Anything new?”

“Yes, actually.” Jeffrey motioned to Alex. “Your fellow here pointed out an interesting tidbit.”

“Do tell.”

“Women often shave their legs against the grain, pulling the razor up their legs even though the hair grows at a downward angle. Men shave in the direction that hair grows; it reduces razor burn on their face.”

“Okay.” Kyra looked at Donna. “Her legs and pubic area weren’t shaved against the grain.”

“No, they weren’t. It’s also likely that he used a straight razor to do the shaving. No laser kit for this boy.”

It wasn’t the most invasive thing she’d ever seen done to a victim, but it was far more intimate that she would have expected from the killer. “No nicks or cuts.”

“No, he was careful not to mar the skin.”

Kyra’s gaze went to the Y-incision that was neatly sealed with medical adhesive, and then to the wound where the killer had taken the tattoo. “He’s not done.”

“No, I wouldn’t say so. His work is focused and thoroughly planned. Nothing passionate or impulsive about the two killings. That makes him far more dangerous, in my estimation.”

“I’m going to put in a request for a profiler.”

“You know the mayor has already told the commander that isn’t an option. He doesn’t like anything in the city that interferes with his control. We get a federal agent in the mix, and all of a sudden he’s answering to some state representative.”

“I have two dead women in four days. Once the press starts connecting the dots on this case, it’s going to be a fucking circus around here.” She glanced back at the table where Ana was working, then looked at Jeffrey. “Send her home once she’s finished with the logged evidence.”

“Commander Baker told me to tell you to take your ass home if you showed up here.” Jeffrey pulled his face shield back into place. “So, take your ass home.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow when I get a chance.”

Alex nodded and cleared his throat. “How can you possibly leave your work at work?”

“It takes effort, but I have to be a whole person if I’m going to be any good to the people I’ve promised to serve and protect.” Kyra loosened her fingers on the steering wheel and looked at him as he made move to leave the vehicle. “Try to get some sleep. God knows you won’t get much once this story breaks.”

She watched him cross in front of her and walk down the street to his parked vehicle. A part of her was a little peeved that he’d chosen to go home instead of staying with her, but the cop in her understood that he needed to distance himself from the violence and death he’d been exposed to. No one was immune to it, not even a man who’d fought in one of the bloodiest wars in the history of their country.

The North American Union had invaded North Korea the same day that she’d graduated from the police academy. The conflict had only been over for two years, so it was safe for her to assume that Alex had spent nearly nine years in a combat zone. Curious, she pulled her p-pc out of the dash docking station and put in a request for his military records. Feeling a tad bit guilty, she put her vehicle in drive and whipped around so she could pull into the enclosed garage for her apartment building.

The record was up by the time she’d parked. Settling into the driver’s seat, Kyra turned off the vehicle and concentrated on the screen of her p-pc. Alexander Matthew Waters had spent nearly ten years in the NAU Special Forces, retiring less than two years ago. His career was littered with commendations for valor, bravery, and self-sacrifice. During service, he’d received two Purple Hearts, one Distinctive Service medal, and had retired with the rank of Master Chief. He’d fought major battles in North Korea and in Cuba during the war that had seen the end of the last two communist countries on earth.

She'd expected to learn that he had served in the Armada or Union Army. The Special Forces branch of the military was unique. They were mentally conditioned from the onset of their training to kill and to kill well. The men and women in the Special Forces units learned nothing of diplomacy, and very few made it out alive.

Yes, Kyra thought, he'd seen a great deal more death than she ever would.

* * * * *

The stupid bitch thought she could deny me. After all that I gave her? The honor of being chosen for my mission should have been obvious to her. I punished her as was needed, but I was careful to bruise her only slightly. I know you are disappointed that she was marred, but she had to understand the pain that she caused me.

She came to the scene again. She was beautiful tonight. Dressed in a dark blue dress. I think she's beginning to understand my mission. I believe she will help us in the end. She'll help us be together. I've almost decided that she is the ONE. I know you'll be pleased with her.

Chapter Eight

“Janie Monroe had no husband, no live-in lover, and from what we can tell, no man since she stopped seeing Alex Waters. She got a tattoo of a dolphin on her upper thigh during Mardi Gras this year. Her son is four years old.” Kyra placed Janie’s picture up on the board with Donna’s and looked at the commander “Then, of course, there is his letter.”

He cleared his throat. “We can be sure he’ll be contacting the press himself.”

“Yes.” Kyra picked up the letter, still in an evidence bag. It had already been printed and tested. The efforts had been futile; the killer had left nothing behind. “The note indicates that he’s less than pleased with the publicity he’s not received.”

Phil held his hand out for the note and turned it to read when Kyra handed it to him.

I can see that you appreciated my gift.

I find Clara Tibideaux to be a gifted woman.

It is wise to seek her counsel.

I am most disappointed, of course, that you haven’t announced me to the world.

I am worthy of the attention.

I demand the world know that I have arrived.

And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

Phil put the note down and cleared his throat as if the words he’d read aloud left a bad taste in his mouth. “He quotes the Bible and practices Voodoo.”

“Clara is sure that he isn’t a practitioner, but instead something of a *Voodooisant*. He’s attended rituals, educated himself on the religion’s ceremonies and artifacts, and might see a practitioner regularly for advice and counsel.” Kyra turned to Phil. “The Bible?”

Phil snorted. “Heathen. The last part is from the Bible, the book of Matthew. A *Voodooisant* is a follower?”

“Yes, a follower.” Kyra expelled a breath as she continued. “As with any religion, a great deal of faith is needed to be a true practitioner of the Voodoo art. He quotes the Bible in much the same way that he uses the utensils of Voodoo. The effort is wrapped up in his need to shock, enrage, and instill fear. He’ll use anything he can to achieve his goal.”

“So the skin ...”

“Is a trophy,” Kyra finished. “A shocking, disgusting trophy that will creep people out and make them fear him.”

Phil dropped his gaze to the table. “I’m not up for this.”

“I know.” Commander Baker sighed and looked at Kyra, who had walked to the conference room door and shut it carefully. “We both know.”

“I’ve had enough crap to get over ... without bailing in a homicide investigation.” Phil rubbed his face. “I’m no good to her, Ethan.”

“Kyra was assigned a new partner this morning.” Ethan stood. “And you should be receiving your transfer to Robbery in the next hour. The transfer was placed at your request, Phil, and it was done with no cut in pay or rank.”

Phil visibly relaxed and released a breath.

“Wow, Phil, no need to look so relieved.”

He blushed. “Smart ass.”

“You’ll keep a desk in Major Crimes until the end of this case. Kyra will need someone on this end who is familiar with the killer and killings for information gathering and interviews.”

“Sounds good.”

* * * * *

Constable Ana Salanti was standing, stiff and apparently loaded for bear, in the middle of Kyra’s office when she entered.

Kyra raised an eyebrow and shut the door. “Constable Salanti, I believe you were requested to report to my office at noon; it’s not even ten o’clock yet.”

Ana’s gaze followed Kyra as she sat down at her desk. “If I’m going to be reprimanded, I’d rather get it done first thing so I can enjoy the rest of my day.”

“You worked all night. I’d thought to give you a few hours of sleep.” Kyra motioned to a chair. “Sit.”

Ana sat down stiffly, her tidy uniform hat primly in her lap. "You worked all night, too."

"The scene at Still Waters was a shocking one. You did well and managed the crowd with a great deal of skill. As the first cop on the scene, you had a lot of room for mistakes, but so far, I've found none. You secured the scene, the witnesses, and did so with a great deal of professionalism. So, Ana, tell me where your mistake was."

"I didn't make one."

"Surely you think that you did; otherwise you wouldn't be here in my office with a stick half as wide as the state up your ass. Or perhaps you think that I like to pull cops in off the street and tear them a new one when I feel like it."

"No, ma'am."

"You'll do, Constable Salanti. You'll do very nicely." Kyra stood and stretched. "I'm going to visit the ME again. Meet me out at my transport in an hour."

Ana stood abruptly. "Ma'am, I did *not* become a police officer to chauffeur anyone, inspector or not, around town."

Kyra laughed. "That's good, because I always drive." She pointed toward the desk that Phil had emptied earlier in the morning. "That is your desk, Ana. The folder on your desk contains your new orders. Read them, understand them, put a picture of your dog or your man on your desk, pull the stick out of your ass, and meet me in the parking lot in an hour. I'll pick you up after I finish with the ME."

Dr. Jeffrey Parker was up to his elbows in gore when Kyra found him. Disgusted and oddly fascinated, she watched him for several minutes as he moved several organs out of Janie Monroe's body and into stainless steel containers. "The verdict?"

"Drowning, just like the first victim. In fact, the water in both victims is very similar. Certainly pulled out of the same lake or stream. The cutting was done with the same sort of instrument; I'm leaning toward a laser scalpel at this point. He'd want the right tool for the job. The patch of skin missing is three inches wide and six inches long. You'll want to look at places in the area that sell chemicals used to cure skin. Taxidermy or leatherworking supply stores. He's not keeping the skin to let it shrivel up."

Kyra nodded and sat down on a stool to his left. "Any sign of sexual assault?"

"Hmmm ..." Jeffrey looked at her and shook his head. "There is indication that he struck her genital region several times with something, possibly his fist."

"Further punishment for being a woman?"

"You're the cop, not me." Jeffrey shrugged. "I'll get you a report as soon as I'm done."

"Do you have the coffin?"

"Yeah." He motioned at a box labeled with Janie Monroe's case number. "You were right, certainly alabaster. No prints, but very nice tool markings. I'd say he carved it himself."

Kyra snagged the bag with the coffin in it and signed it out on the evidence sheet in the box. "I guess I'll go add to Clara's fee."

"You know, you should be really careful, Kyra."

"I always am."

"He's got a plan, he's worked out his victims, and while he couldn't plan for you to be assigned the first murder ... he's very interested in you now. I wouldn't underestimate him if I were you."

"I thought I was the cop."

"You are." Jeffrey motioned her off. "Go talk to the Voodoo witch."

Constable Ana Salanti was sitting on a bench in front of the station when Kyra pulled up to the curb. Ana jumped up and grabbed the two bags from the bench beside her. One was a small leather one, obviously a field kit. The other was a plastic bag from a sub sandwich shop.

Kyra eyed the food as Ana stowed her field kit under her seat. "Constable."

Ana blushed. "I got a foot-long; didn't know what you liked on yours so I got it pretty basic."

"Are you going to be able to handle this assignment?" Kyra wished silently she'd cornered Ana before she'd rearranged the woman's career to suit herself.

"Can I be frank?"

"Yes."

Ana was silent as she unwrapped the sandwich and handed Kyra half. "I'd have to be pretty damn stupid to say 'no' to that question. You are the most decorated cop in the city. While there are those who think you're a miserable human being, I've come to realize that you're just dedicated to your job. I'm fortunate to be partnered with you."

Kyra bit into the sandwich thoughtfully and nodded. "I'm not gay."

"Oh, I know. When I get to know you better, I'm going to have questions about your relationship with Alex Waters."

Kyra laughed. "When I know you better, I might answer them." She put the vehicle into drive as she took another bite of her sandwich. "Okay, here are the rules. I'm Kyra when we're alone. To protect my hard-earned 'badge-eating monster' reputation, I'm Inspector Moray in front of other cops and civilians. You are my partner, not my student or my keeper. Your input is expected, needed, and demanded. I don't like timid; it looks weak. When you're with me, you are reigning princess bitch of the universe, and you will act the part."

Ana nodded her mouth full and eyes wide. She swallowed hard. "Do I get a crown? Because I really dig head jewelry."

Kyra laughed. "Yes, there is something amazing about having a tiara sitting on top of one's head."

"Is it true you were Miss New Orleans?"

"Cops love to spread rumors," she muttered and then sighed. "As a matter of fact, I was Miss New Orleans." She glared pointedly at Ana. "Don't go looking up old pictures of me on the Internet, either."

"No, ma'am."

"Also, the next time someone calls me a 'miserable human being' in front of you, it is your job to kick the shit out of them."

"Can I get that in writing?"

"Remind me when we get back to the station."

"Where are we going?"

"We're off to see the witch."

"Who's the kid?" Clara glared at Ana.

"It should be obvious." Kyra stomped up the porch steps. "Constable Ana Salanti, meet Clara Tibideaux, the first Voodoo queen in New Orleans to surpass Marie Laveau in infamy."

Ana nodded. "Ma'am."

"So now I got me two bitch cops." Clara snorted and walked back into her house.

"Does she bite?" Ana kept her voice low as she followed Kyra.

"Yeah, but I'm pretty sure she's had all of her shots."

Kyra sat down at across from Clara and looked over her shoulder as Ana put her back to a wall and stared pointedly at Clara. "We had another body last night."

"Yeah, saw it on the news."

"He left an alabaster coffin in the victim's mouth." She put the coffin on the table between them.

Clara picked up the evidence bag and opened it. "As you already know, Inspector, the coffin is much like the vial of chicken bones, as far as symbolism goes. They are both used to represent and draw forth evil spirits."

"He hates women."

"Oh, yes." Clara nodded. "The workmanship is good and careful. He's a precise man, and his goal is clear. He took skin again?"

"Yes, we've been able to determine that the flesh from both victims was tattooed. A cat and a dolphin."

"Dolphins are regarded by many cultures as protectors and guardians. Cats are often depicted as instruments of the devil, a witch's familiar. Both animals are perceived to be intelligent and playful."

"Do you think the tattoos matter so much?"

"To him they most certainly do."

Clara reached into the bag and took the coffin out, finally. Her mouth grew firm, and she shook her head. "Such evil."

Kyra was silent as the older woman ran her fingers along the edges of the coffin. It had been smoothed down carefully after it was carved. The scar on her neck got progressively lighter as she sat there. Recognizing fear, she reached out and took the coffin from Clara.

"Do not bring this monster into my house again." Clara stood abruptly. "I won't have it."

"I have a killer in my city killing at will." Kyra stood as well. "You realize a member of your community is responsible for this. No matter his place in Voodoo, he is here. His actions do nothing to facilitate the proper image of your faith. His killing is blasphemous."

"Yes." Clara nodded.

"What can you tell me about him?" She hated asking the question, and hated the old woman for making her ask.

Clara grinned briefly, as if she could hear Kyra's thoughts. "He has a plan, a mission that he regards as the most important thing in his life. With any individual who has a mission, he is dangerous and will become more so if he feels threatened. He's young, but the vision he is following is mature and well planned. The killer is also developing a taste for violence."

Ana was silent until they got in the vehicle. "How did she get that scar on her neck?"

"She was hanged." Kyra started the vehicle and looked back to the house. "In her late twenties, a prominent family in the city came to her because their oldest son was dying. Though she did try, she was unable to cure him. He later died of cancer. The couple blamed Clara and tried to get the parish to file charges against her. When the parish refused, the couple hired two men to kill her."

"Oh, God."

"Sixty-five years ago, things were very different around here. Homeland Security was making life hell for the average citizen. The government was too big. Healthcare reform made disease management possible only for the extremely wealthy, and healthcare on the level their son needed was just beyond their grasp. It would have been a blow to their social standing if the community had found out they couldn't afford to have their child cared for by a doctor."

"So they call in Clara."

“Yes, and when she failed to save their son, they gave two locals a couple thousand credits to kill her. They told everyone that Clara had convinced them they didn’t need a doctor.”

“They tried to kill her to hide the fact that they didn’t have the money they needed for medical treatment?” Ana grimaced. “So what happened?”

“A call came in to dispatch reporting a murder. The responding officer found Clara hanging in a tree not far from her parents’ house. The two men who had been hired to kill her were never found. Most people think Clara cast a spell that drove the two of them into the bayou and it swallowed them up.” Kyra cleared her throat and looked around Clara’s yard. “Well, anyway, the officer actually knew Clara and took her down from the tree despite protocol. He laid her out on the ground, and when he started to cover her face with his coat ... Clara moaned and reached out for his hand.”

“I would have died.”

“He damn near did.” Kyra laughed then. “Can you imagine? Anyway, they took Clara to the hospital and she was there for a few days, recovering.”

“And the couple who tried to have her killed?”

“Oh, they died three days after Clara was found.”

“Of natural causes?”

“Death was undetermined.” Kyra looked at Ana. “I suppose Clara didn’t take with being hanged.”

“Holy shit, Kyra. Please tell me you are making that up.”

“Every single word of it is true.” Kyra grinned.

“I’m never coming out here again.” Ana crossed her arms over her breasts and looked at the scarecrow. “What’s up with that thing?”

“Oh, well, that’s a story in itself.”

Ana held up her hand. “Tell me later. I’m not sure I can take anything else.”

Kyra laughed and shifted into drive. “I thought people from New York were so jaded nothing was shocking.”

“Yeah, well, obviously not all of us are.” Ana grimaced and huddled down into her seat. “Can we hurry?”

Kyra shrugged and turned around in the small circle of Clara’s driveway. “Okay, tell me what you think.”

“About the murders?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve been keeping up the LaRoux case file, so I know that Donna was something of a prisoner in her life, but she had ambition. Janie Monroe was a single mother struggling to get to a better place in her life. She was paid well. In fact, Still Waters is the only bar in town

that pays above minimum wage for their waitstaff, and they get to keep all their tips. A lot of establishments make the waitresses split their tips with the bartenders ..." Ana trailed off and then looked out the window. "So, Janie wanted more out of life for herself and her son. The father of her child doesn't appear to be in the picture; I have no information on him. From what the other waitresses told me, Janie talked a lot about singing professionally and would often sit in with the house band. She had a decent voice and a lot of sassy attitude. The bartender, Jake Banner, said that Janie had a lot of energy."

"We need to take a look at her place."

"She lived with her mother." Ana took out her p-pc and rattled off the street address.

"Anything else?"

"The killings were similar with the exception of the genital bruising."

"You spoke with the ME?"

"No, I overheard him discussing it with another doctor last night."

"Parker thinks he struck her with his fist." Kyra rolled down her window a little bit and sucked a deep breath. "It heightens the sexual aspect of his crimes considerably."

"I noticed you hadn't filed a warrant for her bank records, so I did that before I got our lunch."

Kyra nodded. "Good thinking."

"Waitresses carry around a lot of cash, so we probably won't find a lot of activity in her accounts. It's likely she paid cash for the tattoo, as well."

"Yeah."

"Mr. Waters indicated that Janie was a meticulous person. She was all about the details. Their sexual relationship ended shortly after he opened Still Waters, because she went to work for him. It was a friendly break-up. In fact, none of the current staff even knew about their past relationship. He appears to be very good at separating business and pleasure."

Kyra checked the time on her comm-u and punched in Alex's code. She really had to find time to program the codes in for voice command. "Did he mention anything about her body?"

"Just the missing tattoo."

Her earpiece engaged just as Alex answered the transmission. "Hey."

"Hello, Inspector. The press have been making my life hell."

"I know." Kyra grimaced. "I'll get to them as soon as I can. Do you know if Janie shaved her pubic area regularly?"

"She didn't. In fact, she shaved as little as possible. She had dry skin and was easily cut with a razor. She didn't like the laser removal kits, either. I think she used a beauty parlor for waxing, though."

"Thanks."

"Any time. Do you have time for dinner tonight?"

"Yeah." Kyra double-parked in front of the station and turned to Ana. "Hop out and see if Parker has sent us the report."

Ana nodded and unbuckled her safety harness. "I can't believe I have to leave for the sexy talk. I mean. I'm a grown woman; I've heard dirty words before."

Kyra laughed as she shut the door and hurried into the station. "She's a handful already."

"You chose her."

"I did." Kyra nodded to herself; she didn't regret it so far. "Your interview is scheduled for two p.m. You can bring an advocate if you're leery of the process."

"I trust you, Inspector."

"Good." She let that settle on her and then spoke again. "I won't go easy on you or your brother."

"We don't expect it."

"Since your apartment will be fair game for the reporters, come to my place. I'll order Chinese, and we can do the filthy things Ana thinks we're discussing."

"Sounds good."

Kyra glanced toward the front doors of the building and grinned as Ana hurried out with a big envelope in hand. "I'll call you when I sign off."

"Be careful." He disconnected, and her earpiece went silent. She tried not to be disappointed at the loss of his voice.

Ana climbed up into the vehicle and handed Kyra the envelope. "You know all the guys think you drive this big thing because you don't have a dick."

"You tell them I drive this big thing so I won't have to rent a vehicle when I have a body to dispose of," Kyra returned dryly as she opened the envelope. "Blood results indicate belladonna. At least he's being faithful to one thing."

"Has Janie's killing changed your belief that we're looking for a white male?"

"Statistically speaking, most sexual homicides of this nature are committed by white men. But we can't afford to not include anyone."

"Yeah." Ana fastened her harness. "Phil came by while I was in there. He gave me the list of sexual misconduct offenders that live in the French Quarter."

"How many?"

"Ten. Three thousand and six for the whole city."

"Let's stick to the Quarter for now; he's picking and dumping victims here for a reason. Any of them not pedophiles?"

"Three." Ana stared at the list and then shook her head. "Sick fucks."

"Indeed. Pull the files on those three, and keep the rest for later. Did he give you the list of stalkers?"

"He said it would come through this afternoon." She turned to look at Kyra. "He didn't seem pissed to be off the case."

"Phil is a good cop. He just wasn't cut out for Major Crimes, especially when the majority of cases that come through our department involve homicide."

"Do you think I am?"

"We'll see. Did he give you any basic data on those three?"

"Yep. We have Josiah Davies, arrested for statutory rape. His girlfriend was fifteen and he was nineteen. Her parents filed charges, and he was convicted. He married that same girl eight years later. They have three kids."

"I'm surprised that conviction stuck."

"Her father was a judge."

"Ah." Kyra shrugged. "Who else?"

"John Deets. He's not a registered sex offender, because he was never convicted. He popped in Phil's search for sexual misconduct in the area. He doesn't actually live in the French Quarter, but he's close. He lives on St. Thomas Street in a duplex."

"What was his crime?" Kyra grimaced. She did not look forward to dealing with John Deets again.

"When he was twenty-two, he had a younger man for a lover. He was nineteen, and when the man's parents found out he was having an affair with Deets, they forced him to file charges against Deets for rape. The charges were later dropped."

"Okay, for now, he's the bottom of the list. I don't peg our killer as gay, not with his victim pool." She pursed her lips. "The last one?"

"Irvin Murray."

"Irvin? His parents hated him." She looked toward Ana, who had stopped talking. "So, what's he done?"

Ana frowned. "He's sort of creepy. A few stalking incidents, and he likes to take pictures."

"Any physical contact?"

"Nope, he's had three complaints for stalking. None of them have gone to trial."

"Okay, keep him on the list. I might like to talk to him just to scare the shit out of him." Kyra grimaced as she pulled into a spot across the street from the apartment building where Janie Monroe had lived. "I wish I'd done the notification last night."

"I heard that Commander Baker handled it well. The mother was distraught, but articulate when questioned about her daughter's relationships."

Kyra turned off her transport and pulled the keys out of the ignition. "Her name?"

“Tina Monroe. She was widowed six years ago when her husband of fifty years dropped dead of a heart attack on the job. He was a captain with District 7 until the reorganization, and served on the Service and Security review board until his retirement. He joined the force when he was eighteen years old.”

Kyra turned to Ana, her mouth firm. “Janie Monroe was a cop’s kid?”

“Yeah. The news filtered through the stationhouse first thing this morning. I thought you knew last night.”

She shook head, though the knowledge did nothing to change how she would treat Janie Monroe’s murder. Every death was equal to her, but the knowledge altered her perception of the killer. “He knew Janie Monroe just as he knew Donna LaRoux. He knew she was a cop’s kid and that killing her would make every cop in the city angry as hell.”

“It didn’t matter to him. Neither one of them mattered.”

“You’re right. After he’d done what he needed to do, they didn’t matter. For a while, they were the center of his world. He watched them, coveted them for whatever it is that they mean to him, and then he took them.” She glanced toward the apartment building. “I’ll do the talking. You get to stand around and look official, safe, and comforting.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Tina Monroe was a tidy woman who talked with her hands, regardless of what she might be holding. Kyra dodged coffee several times before she carefully reached out and took the half-empty cup from the woman.

“Ms. Monroe, I want you to understand that Janie will have justice. It won’t bring her back, it might not even give you comfort, but it is what I can do for her and your family.”

“Are you good at what you do?”

“Yes, I am.”

“My Thomas was good at his job, too. He loved being a cop.”

“We are continually honored by those who served the community.”

Tina nodded and sat back in the chair. “She wasn’t dating anyone. There was a lover, but I never asked his name.”

Kyra shared a glance with Ana. “Did she speak of him often?”

A small smile played on Tina’s lips briefly as she shook her head. “No, Janie was under the impression that sexual intercourse no longer existed for me. She was discreet about it. My Janie wasn’t interested in trotting a string of men through her son’s life while she looked for the next Mr. Right.”

“You found her secrecy amusing?”

“Yes. It was something of a game, an innocent sort of game.” Tina shrugged. “In my day, a discreet affair could be an exciting and fascinating arrangement. Just the sort of

adventure a young girl sought with no real risks. There is nothing like being involved with a man who really understands a woman.”

“What sort of man did Janie like?”

“She liked strong and thoughtful people. He would have to be smart and ambitious. Janie didn’t even bother with men who didn’t work. I can’t imagine her being involved with a man who would hurt a woman. She had good instincts about that sort of thing.”

“Janie’s son?”

“He’s at school right now.”

“His father?”

“He was killed in a car accident.” Tina stood. “I’m all the boy has now.” She walked to the only window in the small living room.

“Mrs. Monroe, I’d like to take a look at Janie’s room, and then we’ll be gone. I don’t want to make your grandson uncomfortable.”

Kyra waited for the woman’s nod before she stood. With a silent nod to Ana, she went down the hall to the closed door. It was the only closed door in the entire apartment. Inside the room, she found a neatly organized space that managed to look grown-up and innocent at the same time. The full-size bed was made; a nightgown had been tossed on it. A few stuffed animals littered the bed among the pillows. Perfume bottles were cluttered on the dresser in a colorful assortment.

“Do you think her mom cleaned up in here?”

“No, I doubt she’s been in here since she was notified that Janie was dead.” Kyra sat down on the edge of the bed and looked around the room.

“Do you think he’s the tattoo artist?”

“I don’t know. We still don’t have a hit on Donna’s tattoo. She must have paid cash. I think, like Donna, he was familiar to Janie. Familiar enough that she was friendly with him. I don’t get the impression that either victim had social anxiety issues. He existed on the edge of their lives, familiar enough to get close to them.” She stood and glanced toward Ana.

“Janie did have a comm-u registered in her name.” Ana looked around the room. “But no p-pc or compu-station.”

“No, a woman like her would have devoted what extra money she had to her child’s care and education.”

“We can flag her financials for any public compu use.”

“Yeah.” Kyra glanced around room. “What connects Janie and Donna LaRoux?”

“They both waited tables, and they both had tattoos done during Mardi Gras.”

Kyra nodded. “We should go.”

Chapter Nine

Kyra watched Alex walking around in the interview room. She was tempted to pass the interview to a detective in her unit. Since she'd never passed an interview off to someone else, though, and she wasn't going to start with him, even if he was her lover.

Ana was silent beside her, sipping her coffee and trying to look tough.

"You know he isn't involved."

"He doesn't fit the profile," Kyra corrected. "Prep his brother for questioning. I shouldn't be long with him."

"I put Marcus Waters in Room 3."

Kyra nodded and walked to the door. She hated what she was about to do. Hated it and hoped that Alex would really understand it. Did he know how hard the questions were going to be?

He paused in his pacing when she entered the interview room. Motioning him to sit, she took her own seat and prepared the recording station. "You've been fully briefed on your rights and obligations during questioning?"

"Yes." He pulled out the chair and sat down.

"It's been noted that you agreed to wear the truth monitoring devices voluntarily." Kyra looked up and met his gaze. "What was your relationship with Janie Monroe?"

"She worked for me."

"When is the last time you remember seeing her alive?"

"She worked Wednesday night. Her check was picked up Friday morning, but I wasn't at the bar when she came in."

"Did you, at any time during the last few months, notice anything particular about her behavior?"

Alex shrugged and shook his head. "Not off the top of my head. She was a reliable employee, and I valued her in that role."

"There was a time when she had a different role in your life."

"Yes. We were lovers."

"And that relationship ended when she came to work at Still Waters."

"Yes. I make it a rule to never involve myself with employees. She knew that, and we both agreed that ending our physical relationship was for the best. Janie was a decent and ambitious woman. I wanted the best for her and her son." Alex leaned back in his chair and picked up the bottle of water he'd brought with him. He drank deeply as she asked her next question.

"What were your feelings for Janie Monroe?"

"I found her physically attractive and enjoyed her company. When our relationship changed, we spent a few tense weeks getting that attraction out of the way."

"And you did get it out of the way?" Kyra watched his face as he considered his answer.

"Yes. I valued her friendship enough to set that aside. She needed a safe place to work, where she could make a decent living and provide for her child."

"Did you at any time during the evening of October 22, 2162, see Janie Monroe?"

"Just when I went out into the alley to confirm what my brother had told me." He cleared his throat. "When Marcus told me there was a dead body in the alley, I assumed that it would be a homeless person. I certainly didn't expect to find one of my employees."

"Janie didn't work Friday night."

"No, though she was invited to attend the party. I hired outside help so that the staff could celebrate my birthday with me if they chose to."

"Did she indicate that she would be attending the party?"

"Her son had a function at his school. I didn't expect her to come, but she was on the guest list."

"Did your brother seem unduly agitated during the evening before the body was discovered?"

Alex's head jerked up and his gaze narrowed. "No. He'd done several sets that night and was in good spirits. Performing is his first love."

"Did he have a relationship with Janie outside of Still Waters?"

"I don't make a habit of asking my brother the intimate details of his life, but he knew I would have been displeased if he'd taken to dating the employees."

"Did Marcus know about your past relationship with the victim?"

"Yes. He'd come home shortly before Janie took the job at Still Waters. We had several occasions to socialize, and he knew that we were lovers." He glanced down at the recording

station between them and then met her gaze. “The night Donna LaRoux was murdered, my brother was on a transport flight from New York.”

“Your friend, John Deets, was in attendance at the party. Do you consider him to be a dangerous man?”

Alex openly glared at her for the first time and put his bottle of water down on the table. “John is a troubled man, but I’ve never known him to be violent with women. In fact, in the ten years that I’ve known him, I’ve never known him to be involved with a woman.”

“Where was John Deets when your brother, Marcus, returned to tell you about the body in the alley?”

“He was hitting on the drummer from my brother’s band. From what I could see, he was successful in his endeavor.” Alex cleared his throat and picked up the water.

“When Marcus came to tell you about the body, what did he say?”

“He was shaky, and to be honest, not making a lot of sense. I don’t remember ever seeing him like that; it was a little shocking. After a couple of questions, I was able to find out that he’d discovered a body in the alley when he’d gone out to smoke.”

“Did he say Janie’s name?”

“No, not until we were out in the alley. I honestly don’t think he even looked at her face the first time he saw her. When I knelt down to check her pulse, he realized who it was.”

“It must have been very difficult to find your friend and ex-lover in such a way.”

“Yes, it was.”

Kyra reached out and turned off the station. “Thank you.”

Alex stood immediately. “You don’t honestly think that Marcus could do something like that?”

“No, I don’t think it. But I have to ask. My world doesn’t exist only on hunches and instinct. I don’t leave holes for assholes to escape through in my cases. Every witness is thoroughly screened and questioned, despite what I already know about them.”

“Had I known this was how it would be, I would have suggested that Marcus have an advocate on hand.”

“He doesn’t need a lawyer.” Kyra stood up and picked up her p-pc. “If you want, you can observe his interview.”

As she moved away from the table, Alex grabbed her arm and pulled her to him. “I’m trying to remember that you’re just doing your job.”

“Good. You should also realize that this interview is being monitored.” She looked pointedly at his hand and took a step away from him when he released her. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll let you into the observation deck so that you can make sure I don’t pick on your brother.”

Alex watched as Kyra took a seat across from Marcus. She looked every inch the cop she was. "You don't have to babysit me, Constable."

Ana looked up from her p-pc. "Actually, I do. Civilians aren't allowed in observation areas without an escort. Besides, you're pretty, so it isn't too much of a hardship for me."

He laughed. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." She looked out to the interview room and cleared her throat. "I know you're probably pissed about the way she questioned you."

"She's doing her job."

"Yes, she is." Ana stood and walked to the window to stand beside him. "When I found out I was going to be her partner, I nearly threw up."

"Why?"

"Because she's that good. She's tough and unreasonable at times, but she never asks a question that doesn't need asking, and she never sets out to hurt anyone. I've barely been her partner a full day and I know without a single doubt that she would die for me. That sort of dedication doesn't just happen, and when she invites someone into her life, it's because she wants him or her there. I'm her partner because she wanted it to be that way."

"So, is it your job as her partner to pat her lover on the head when she makes him mad?"

Ana chuckled. "Well, like I said, you are pretty."

"A grown man doesn't really like to be called pretty, Constable."

"Can't change the facts." Ana shrugged and reached over to turn on the speaker. "She's ready to begin."

"How many times did you go into the alley that night."

Marcus shook his head. "Not many, maybe three before I found her."

"Did you recognize her when you saw her that first time?"

"No. I don't even remember looking for Alex. I've seen my share of violence, Inspector, but what I saw in that alley isn't like anything I've ever seen before. For a moment I don't even think I understood what I was seeing."

Kyra looked over his face, saw the grief that still lingered there, and regretted what she would ask next. "Did you kill Janie Monroe?"

He sat back abruptly in the chair and wordlessly shook his head. "No. Of course not."

"When was the last time you saw the victim?"

"Friday morning she came by to pick up her check. I teased her about not trusting electronic delivery. She mentioned that she wouldn't be at the party because of her son, but

wished me well on my performance.” He glanced over her shoulder to the mirrored observation window and then met her eyes. “Do I need an advocate?”

“Not as far as I’m concerned. Do you think you need an advocate?”

“No. I had nothing to do with what happened to Janie.”

“Did you see anything or anyone in that alley before you found Janie?”

“A homeless man named Gary came through around seven looking for some food. Since the event was catered, the uneaten food had already been allotted to a shelter on Canal. I told him that, and he left. The alley was empty after that.”

* * * * *

Ana Salanti was sitting on a bench in front of her locker, pointedly ignoring the other women in the room. Being a cop wasn’t easy, but being a female cop came with a set of challenges and obstacles so daunting that it could be overwhelming. She’d had a dream come true this morning. Getting a partner like Kyra Moray just wasn’t something someone could plan for. She knew it was probationary until she passed the sergeant’s test, but the step up she’d received was like a kick in the ass.

“I guess you’ll actually have to study for the sergeant’s test now.”

Ana blushed and met her former partner’s gaze. “Yeah.”

“I heard she’s a real hard-ass.” Casey Mills sat astride the bench just down from her. “It must be something else to be given an assignment like this in the middle of a serial killer case.”

“I earned the assignment.”

“I heard she asked for you specifically,” Casey muttered.

Ana shrugged. She stood and closed her locker. Maybe, she thought, she would clean out the locker and wear her uniform into work until she could pass the sergeant’s test. Disgusted with her cowardly thoughts, Ana checked her off-duty weapon in her waist holster and pulled on a lightweight jacket.

“You’ve been on the job less than five years. There are men and women here who’ve been on the job a hell of a lot longer than that. Do you think you deserve to be given an opportunity none of them have been given?” Casey stood and met Ana’s gaze.

“I did my job, and my work got noticed.”

“Yeah, well, I was right there along with you. I just wasn’t kissing her ass.” Casey stood from the bench and turned her back on Ana.

“I didn’t kiss the inspector’s ass to get this position, and even if I’d thought that kissing her or anyone else’s ass would have gotten me this kind of opportunity, I wouldn’t have done it. Do you think, for a moment, that I don’t get how lucky I am? She’s the youngest inspector

in the entire city. When she was promoted to the head of Major Crimes last year, it changed a lot of things around here. Most for the better.”

“I know.” Casey rubbed the back of her neck and shrugged. “It’s just ... hell, I know you deserve the chance. I just think I do, too!”

“I know that. But I’m in no position to make demands. I’ve already put my foot in it once with her. You can’t expect me to do it again.”

“I don’t.” Casey sat down on the bench again and crossed her arms over her chest. She met Ana’s gaze briefly and then dropped her gaze to the floor. “I’ll just have to make sure that I catch her attention, too. I’m an asset to this district.”

“You are good at what you do.” Ana sighed. “Doing your job right the first time is what counts around here.”

“It’s good that you think so.”

Ana jerked and turned to see Kyra. “Inspector Moray.”

“We’ve got another body.” Kyra looked at Casey. “Constable Mills.”

Casey rose from the bench, a blush stealing across her cheeks. “Inspector.”

“You’ll need to report to the coordinator of the watch for your new orders.”

Ana checked her badge hanging on the chain around her neck and then looked at Kyra. “I’m going to ask an insulting question.”

Kyra shrugged. “Go ahead. If you’re lucky, I won’t punch you.”

“What did you *do* to Casey Mills?”

“I didn’t *do* anything to Constable Mills. I took her partner, and I recognized that she was on those scenes with you. I checked her employment file over, and when the commander reassigned you to me, I suggested that she be transferred to Anti-Crime. A position she can stay in on the same conditions you face. Anti-Crime is a high-traffic unit with a great rate of arrest and conviction.”

“Oh.”

“If she hates it or if she spends entirely too much time compared to every other woman in the unit dressed as a hooker, let me know.”

“Okay.” Ana blew air through her lips. “Sorry.”

“No problem; this is new for both of us.” Kyra glanced at her. “You don’t look comfortable.”

“I’ve never worked out of uniform.” She checked her gun again. “I should have changed.”

“Ah, well, there’s a first time for everything. You need to get used to it. The uniform does lend itself to a certain image. A lot of people respond to it, but it isn’t what makes you a cop.” Kyra sighed and engaged her comm-u. “For the next two minutes, I’m going to pretend

you aren't in this vehicle." Kyra wished like hell she hadn't paid attention to dispatch when they'd called in the body. "Hey, I'm going to have to cancel dinner."

"Lady, you're lucky I like you." Alex sighed in her ear.

"Yeah, I know." She looked at Ana, who was silent and grinning. "I doubt I'll be home at all tonight. I've caught another body."

"That doesn't sound promising."

"No. Is the press still hounding you?"

"A few calls here and there."

"We've got a press conference scheduled for first thing in morning. I can't guarantee it's going to get the press off your back. We are going to have to call in a fed for a profile of the killer. They'll be calling him a serial killer by tomorrow afternoon."

"Be careful, and you owe me something profoundly dirty for skipping out on dinner."

"Deal." Kyra was silent for a moment after he ended the call. "I'm in so much trouble with that man."

"We should all be in that kind of trouble," Ana responded dryly.

Kyra had to laugh. "Yeah."

"So, what do you know about the scene so far?"

"State trooper found her on the side of the road. She has some skin missing, so they kicked it to me because of the two bodies we already have with that distinctive trait."

"That's a pretty far stretch from his previous two dumping grounds."

"Yeah."

The young woman had been tossed aside like garbage. Kyra circled the body. "Ana, make sure the privacy screens are arranged so drivers can't see the body." There was no need for some slaphappy driver to snag a picture of her murder scene with their p-pc. "Tell me what you see, Jeffrey."

"The removal of the skin on her left shoulder blade is precise and well done. That's certainly the mark of our boy."

"The other victims weren't mutilated like this."

"No, whoever killed her was very angry." He motioned to a series of stab wounds that spread over her body from just below her breasts all the way down to her lower thighs. "The pattern is frenzied. I'll know more once I get her into the lab. I'd say we're dealing with the same guy."

"It doesn't make any sense." Kyra squatted down and with a gloved hand brushed the woman's hair from her face. "Ah, Christ." For a moment, she simply stared at the face of Stacey Valteau.

"You know her."

“Yes.” Kyra stood and tilted back her head a little. There wasn’t enough fresh air in the world suddenly. She dragged in several deep breaths. “Stacey Valteau.”

“Noel Valteau’s daughter?”

“Yeah.”

Jeffrey Parker stood and motioned to his team. “I’ll get back to you with anything I can find.”

“Yeah.”

“There was nothing in her mouth, by the way.”

Kyra absorbed that fact and looked around the scene. “Who’s the trooper who found her?”

“That would be me, ma’am.”

Kyra looked over the young man’s face and nodded. “My partner will take your statement.”

She engaged her comm-u and input the code for the Smythe House. Neal Valteau answered with a cheerful greeting. Kyra felt guilt stir in her gut. “Neal, it’s Kyra Moray. I need you to meet me at the diner.”

“Kyra, I’m swamped. I have two new intakes, and it’s nearly the dinner hour.”

“Neal, I need you to meet me at the diner. It’s important.”

Neal was silent for a moment. “Has something happened to my dad?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

Kyra ended the transmission and looked at Ana, who was talking with the state trooper. She met her gaze and motioned toward her vehicle.

“I’ve known Noel Valteau since I was five years old.” Kyra’s hand tightened into a fist, and her gaze went to the entrance of the diner. “His wife died four years ago; she had ovarian cancer. Some fucking modern world we live in.”

“Cancer isn’t fatal anymore.”

“She didn’t believe in going to the doctor. All that nanotechnology repair stuff really freaked her out.” Kyra grimaced. “She could have lived another forty years if she’d taken care of herself.”

“Do you want me to do this?”

She shook her head. “No, but thanks for offering.” She straightened her shoulders as Neal Valteau approached them. He’d been leaning on his car when they’d pulled into the parking lot. “Neal.”

“Kyra.” He glanced briefly at Ana and then focused on her face again. “What’s wrong?”

"I'm going to be blunt. It's the only way I know how to say it."

"I've always admired that about you."

"Stacey is dead. She was discovered a little over an hour ago on the highway."

Neal paled and closed his eyes; he barely acknowledged Ana when she grabbed hold of him to steady him. "I'm all right."

"You look like you might faint," Ana murmured. "Do you think we can get your father to close the diner? It might be best if he got this news at home."

"Neal."

He met Kyra's gaze unflinching. "There's more."

"Yes. At this point, it's believed that Stacey is a victim of the same man who killed the waitress that worked here."

"The press is speculating ..." Neal closed his mouth tightly and looked toward his father's diner. "He can't take it, Kyra. Not again. Losing my mother was like a knife in his heart. To have Stacey taken so violently from us ... I'm just not sure how he'll react."

"We don't have much of a choice." Kyra shared a look with Ana and then looked at the diner. "I'm going to go in and speak to your father alone. When it's done, I'll leave and you do what you can to keep him calm. Constable Salanti will clean out the diner in the meantime."

"Yeah."

Kyra left them both standing in the parking lot. Her quick, long-legged stride brought her to the entrance of the diner, and with a heavy heart, she went inside. Noel Valteau was behind the counter and offered her a soft smile. She watched the smile fade as she focused on him intently. He swallowed hard, and with a jerk of his head motioned her back to his office. She followed along behind him, knowing that for the first time in her life she was about to break a man's heart.

Ana helped pass out the last of the to-go containers and looked at Neal. He was sitting in a booth near the back of the diner, silent and devastated. The woman in her wanted to gather him up and make it all go away. The cop in her wanted bloody unforgiving justice against the man who'd torn Stacey Valteau away from her family.

The last of the waitstaff handed her the front door keycard and left. She locked up and looked around. "I've never been in here when it was so empty."

"Dad has always done well with this place." Neal cleared his throat and looked back toward the office. "I'm not sure what to do to help him."

"Just be there." Ana slid into the booth across from him. "You'll need each other a lot right now. It's okay to depend on each other."

"Yeah."

She covered his hand with hers and squeezed gently. "Some say Kyra is obsessed with justice."

"I hope so."

"We can't make it right, Neal. But we'll make him pay for it."

They both jumped when the office door opened and Kyra came out. Her eyes were wild and hard. "Let's go."

Neal stood and took the keycard Ana offered him. "I know you'll do what you can."

"Yes," Ana murmured.

Ana followed Kyra out of the building and glanced back just once to watch Neal Valteau relock the door. Kyra was silent in the driver's seat as she fastened her harness.

"Kyra?"

"I've been working in Major Crimes since I was twenty-one years old. I started with this sense of hope that I could make a difference."

"You have."

"I had all of these grand ideals about how morally right it would be to stand up for the dead or the victimized. I wanted to defend the dignity of those who were taken from us unnaturally."

"There is nothing wrong with that."

"Noel Valteau laid his head in my lap and cried like a baby." She took in a deep breath. "There is no justice for grief like that."

"Murder was the first crime man committed against man."

"And it will likely be the last crime man will commit against man," Kyra whispered in response. "I need a few hours to collect myself. Sign both of us out for an extended rest period."

* * * * *

Alex opened the door. "Inspector."

Kyra felt some of the ache start to fade, and she cursed herself for the weakness. What was it about Alex Waters that made her so stupid and reckless with her heart? She let him pull her into his apartment and sighed when he shut the door and took her hand.

She tucked her face against his neck for a moment and then sighed again. "I hope you aren't still mad at me."

He laughed softly and wrapped his arms around her. "You look a little worse for wear."

"When I catch this bastard, I'm going to make him regret every moment he's ever lived." She pulled him closer. "I need you right now."

He pulled her shirt from her jeans and ran his hands up beneath her vest. "How?"

“Hard, deep, and fast.”

She shrugged out of the holster as he guided her down the hall and into the bedroom. Kyra tossed her gun into a chair by the bedroom door and pulled her shirt over her head.

“You are wearing entirely too much,” Alex muttered. “How long do I have you?”

“Three hours.” She curled her fingers into the front of his jeans as he unsnapped the front closure of her bra. “Will it be enough time?”

“It’ll have to do.”

She laughed softly and unbuckled his belt. Impatient, she unbuttoned and unzipped him quickly and filled her hands with his cock. A soft sound of pleasure escaped her lips as she wrapped her hand around him. His thumbs tweaked her nipples briefly before he dropped his hands to her jeans. With little finesse, he jerked on the buttons until they gave away.

“Watch my buttons. I have to pay extra for those.”

Alex grinned and slid his hand into her jeans and panties. He pushed his fingers between her labia and teased her clit before cupping her. Pressing two fingers into her, he pulled her closer. “What a slave to fashion you’re turning out to be.”

Kyra ground her pussy against his hand as she stroked the silky flesh of his cock. “I’ll make you pay for that comment later.”

“Sit down.” He guided her to the bed and pushed gently.

Kyra leaned back a little as Alex knelt at her feet. He removed her boots and socks, then jerked her jeans downward and away.

“My, aren’t you excited.” Her gaze drifted from his cock up to his face.

He laughed as he pulled his shirt over his head. “It’s your fault. You drive me insane, you know.”

“Oh, I know.” She slid her fingers into the sides of her panties and scooted out of them as she watched him dispatch his jeans and boxers.

Moving up onto the bed completely, she let one hand drift between her legs, fingers parting her labia, and ran her fingernail along the hard flesh of her clit.

Arching against her hand a little, she looked at him and wet her bottom lip. “Will you eat me?”

“Lady, I’ll do anything you want.” Moving onto the bed, he knelt between her parted legs.

She stiffened in anticipation as he lowered his head to the aching flesh of her pussy. He ran his hands down her thighs, spread her legs wider, and feasted. The first brush of his tongue brought a hushed moan from her lips, and her whole body melted at the pleasure of it.

“Oh, yes.” With one hand she touched his head, stroking but applying no pressure. “Just like that.”

His tongue delved into her briefly before sweeping upward to tease at her clit. She lifted her hips in response and let her hand drop from his head. Her soft, breathy moans filled the room with each brush of his tongue. Moving and jerking against his mouth, Kyra pulled at him suddenly.

“Alex.”

“Tell me.”

“Put your cock in me.”

“Do you still want it hard?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Fast?”

“Definitely.”

“Deep?” he asked in a strained voice as he slipped the head of his cock against her entrance.

“As deep as possible.”

She could only nod when he pushed deep and hard into her. He pulled from her nearly completely and slammed back into her with the weight of his body.

“Like this?” Alex demanded as he thrust into her again. “Tell me, baby.”

“Yes, yes. Fuck me just like that.”

Pressing her feet against the bed, she met the movements of his body with hers. Clinging, demanding, and finally begging for everything he had, Kyra felt herself let go. Control slipped, and she shook beneath him. Relief and pleasure made war in her body as he pushed them both relentlessly toward orgasm.

She gasped and stilled when he slipped one hand between them and pressed the pad of this thumb against her clit. Orgasm rushed to the surface and spilled over her, blocking out the world and letting all the things she’d wanted to hide from disappear, if only briefly.

“It hasn’t been three hours.”

He’d lounged in the bed after she’d sprung up to dress.

Kyra sat down on the edge of the bed and grinned. “I need to go home and shower before I go back in.”

“You look better.” He brushed her hair out of her face and pulled her down for a kiss. “Much better.”

She brushed her mouth over his several times, the teasing kisses making her want to crawl back into bed with him. “Things are too new between us for me. I don’t know what to make of you, but I do know that I want to find out.”

"Yeah. I get that." He left the bed and pulled on a pair of boxers as she picked up her gun holster. "We probably didn't pick the best time to start something."

She turned to him and shook her head. "There's always a case. Though I must admit that having a serial killer loose in the city is wreaking havoc with my regular schedule."

"How do you keep it separate?"

"Sometimes I don't." Kyra picked up the T-shirt. "Stacey Valteau is dead. The bastard dumped her on the side of the highway, naked and abused. She was a good kid, funny and so bright. I could hunt him down and skin him alive for it."

Alex leaned against the wall. "Stacey? God, she can't even be eighteen."

"Turned seventeen in April," Kyra responded. "I can't think about her on a personal level; I'll never get anything done for her like that. I spent too much time focused on Donna LaRoux's personal life. I wanted to believe that whoever killed her was there, that I didn't have what everyone was already saying I had."

He took her hand as they walked down the hall towards the front door. "Are you a good cop, Kyra?"

"I am."

"Do you give your best to the job?"

"Yes."

"Then everything else will follow. You do the best job you can for Stacey, and her family will be grateful." He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm. "I've decided that I'm not in this just for the sex. I want more."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, and you'll just have to deal with it." He kissed her lips and released her.

Deal with it. Kyra mulled those words over as she stopped in front of Ana's apartment building. She looked toward the front door and saw Ana, already dressed in a crisp uniform, coming out of the building. Ana tossed her hat on the console as she got into the vehicle.

"You look thoroughly laid."

Kyra laughed. "Where's the respect?"

"Any woman that sends me off to take a nap like a five-year-old while she plays house with a sexy man gets no respect from me."

"Well, it was so damn good, I don't care if you respect me."

"I was thinking about Stacey Valteau while I was drying my hair." Ana pulled out her p-pc. "I think she disappointed him or ruined his plans. We should ask Neal Valteau some questions."

"I noticed that you did a very good job comforting him."

Ana pursed her lips. "I was just doing my job."

"Sure you were."

"You suck."

"Funny, Phil used to say that all the time."

"I've always thought Phil was a stand-up kind of guy."

Kyra nodded; she thought so, too. They made the rest of the drive to the ME's in silence. It was approaching nine o'clock on a Saturday evening, but the parking lot was still full.

All three bodies were out in a large room with teams working and reworking samples and evidence when they entered the main examination room. Kyra walked to Parker, who was working with the last victim, Stacey. Making herself not look at the body, she focused on the ME.

"What are you up to?"

"We're comparing bodies, Inspector. Some educated people in my field call it forensic science. I've brought Dr. Desdemona Marcos in to consult. Tell her what we got, Desi."

A young woman with tiny blue braids pulled off a pair of safety glasses. "All three bodies were cut by the same instrument. We believe the weapon to be some sort of sport knife used for skinning and cleaning animals. The blade is at least eight inches in length; we were able to determine measurement based on Stacey Valteau. The original opinion of a laser scalpel just didn't play when we started working with Stacey. She was stabbed no less than fifty times. The killing area was not the place she was dumped, but you knew that." She smacked her gum as she motioned them toward Janie Monroe.

"Janie Monroe, the second victim, is special in several ways. First, the external genital bruising is unique to her; neither the third or first was damaged in that way. She's African American, and she was a single mother. Janie is also the oldest of the victims. I was able to get with her mother first thing this morning and got this basic rendition of her tattoo." She held up a drawing. "I'll be working with Donna LaRoux's stepbrother to get a mock-up of hers. We know next to nothing about the tattoos themselves. The skin removal was so good that until we can catch a break, we won't be able to get an accurate assessment of the artist."

"Aren't they all the same?"

"No, tattooing is an art in several ways. First, of course, is the visual itself. It's got to be positioned well on the skin, properly proportioned to the body part, and the dye itself has to be equally distributed over the same layer of the skin. The better the skin work is, the more professional the artist is."

"Who's the best artist in town?"

"Ivy Johnson on Delis Avenue, but she never works during Mardi Gras." She smacked her gum again.

"How long does it take to put a tattoo on?"

"These days, about twenty to thirty minutes. It depends on the artist and the equipment. If the artist already has the pattern for the tattoo stored in his ink-wand, the laser impression can be burned into the skin and the color filled in fairly quickly. The smaller the tattoo, of course, the faster the process will go."

"Pain?"

"The laser burn is fast, but it can be intense. No more intense than the old-fashioned way of inking a tattoo into the skin, though."

Kyra nodded. "Good. Anything else?"

"Oh, yeah. We've got some pretty exciting stuff going on." She motioned them back to Stacey Valteau. "He made a ton of mistakes with her body. It is obvious he lost control. The cutting of the skin on the shoulder blade appears pretty steady to the naked eye, but it's a hack job compared to the others. He also didn't bathe her." Desi's eyes brightened. "We got DNA. Stacey put up one hell of a fight."

"Good for her." Ana glanced briefly at the body before dropping her gaze to the floor.

"Any prints?"

"No. But we're still looking." Desi pulled her safety glasses back on as Parker pulled off the shielded helmet he was wearing and approached them.

"Let's go into my office." He motioned them ahead of him as he pulled off his gloves and tossed them in a container at the door.

Kyra sat down and waited for him to get settled and begin. He was troubled; that much was certain. She couldn't imagine how the case could get any worse.

"He's escalated to sexual assault."

"Did you get semen?"

"No, but I honestly can't be sure he didn't use an object. The damage is relatively consistent with a penis insertion, but it could have been a similar-shaped object or a sexual aid. The DNA evidence was under her nails. She managed to get quite a bit of skin off of him."

"Results?"

"Nothing in the national database and nothing in the immigration files." Desi sat down at a compu-station as she spoke. "This is what I can tell you. No one enters the North American Union without a DNA profile on file with their own government, which is then transmitted along with the individual's travel data."

"So, our killer is an undocumented immigrant?" Ana frowned.

"Or," Desi looked toward Kyra, "an individual that was somehow missed by the system. There are very few unattended births these days, but twenty to thirty years ago that wasn't the case in this area."

Kyra nodded. "Yes."

Kyra was in the large conference room pinning Stacey Valteau's picture up next to the other victims when Neal found her.

He was pale, his eyes dark with fury and sadness, as he looked the board over. "How long will he be out there killing women?"

"You don't need to see this." Kyra maneuvered him out of the room and shut the door. "We're doing everything we can, and trust me when I say that I will not stop searching for him. He'll pay for what he did to all of them."

Neal nodded. "I had to admit my father to the hospital; he started having chest pains. He's stable, but they're keeping him sedated."

Kyra guided him into her office and cast one glance toward Ana as she closed the door. Neal sat down in a chair in front of Kyra's desk and covered his face with his hands. "If you could answer a few questions, it would help."

"Yeah."

"Did Stacey have a tattoo?"

"No ... well, she did. She got a tattoo of a dragon on her shoulder during Mardi Gras this year, but after about two months, she regretted it. She had it removed about four months ago."

"Can you give me the name of the doctor who did the removal?"

"Yeah, shouldn't be a problem."

"Do you know where she got the tattoo?"

"Yeah, a place called Tat's the Way on Bourbon Street."

"Was Stacey seeing anyone?" Kyra shared a glance with Ana.

"She'd had a few relationships in the past year, but she was experimenting and was sort of fickle. Stacey was the average seventeen-year-old in that respect." He leaned forward and cleared his throat. "Tell me what he did to her."

"Neal ..."

"Damn it, Kyra. Just tell me."

"He stabbed her over fifty times with an eight-inch knife of some sort. Then he dumped her on the side of the road."

"Rape?"

"The evidence supports sexual abuse."

He nodded quickly and cleared his throat. "When can we get the body for burial?"

"I don't know when Parker will be able to release the bodies."

"My dad will want to see her. I don't want him to be shocked. You'll make sure that they do their best to make her presentable?"

"Neal, it would be best if your father didn't see the body." Ana leaned on Kyra's desk as she spoke. "Convince him that it would be better if he could remember her as she was."

Kyra watched Neal's face, saw the anger and the sadness collide. There was nothing she could do for him that would make his world right again. No amount of justice would ever fill the hole that had been torn into his family.

"We'll need a list of her friends."

"Okay." He stood and cleared his throat. "If it's okay, I'll transmit that to you this afternoon. You'll want access to her room at my father's house?"

"Yes."

"There's a spare keycard under the fake alligator in the front yard. Take anything you need." He stood and shoved his hands into his pocket. "Thank you for taking care of her, Kyra. I have faith that you'll do your best."

Kyra was silent until he shut her office door behind him. "Did the warrant for Janie's financials come through?"

"Yes."

"Good. Looks like we're heading for Bourbon Street."

* * * * *

Are you angry? Of course you are. I have no excuse for the violence. I was furious with her. How dare she disrespect me? The stupid little bitch took off my work and discarded it like it meant nothing! She could have ruined everything; my whole mission could have been destroyed by her stupidity and vanity.

She's not so vain now. I made sure of that. She didn't leave the world pure and beautiful like the others. The bitch was unworthy of it. I put everything right and took what I needed from her, so you needn't worry. Everything will go as planned.

The choice has been made. She's perfect. You'll be so pleased when you return to me.

Chapter Ten

Tat's the Way was a small tattoo parlor with two old-fashioned barber chairs for the customers. The walls were plastered with hundreds of pictures of tattooed body parts. Kyra chose not to look at them too closely.

"I need to speak with Henry Andrews."

A young girl with jet-black hair and white lipstick glanced up from her work to look at Kyra. "He doesn't work Saturday nights. Come back on Monday."

"Why don't you get on the comm-u and tell him the police are here." Kyra flipped open her badge.

She shrugged and shouted, "Yo, Henry, the cops are here!"

"Constable Salanti, you can explain obstruction of justice to this young lady while I talk with Henry," Kyra ground out through clenched teeth as she pushed past the girl and into the curtained area.

Kyra's eyes moved from the bare ass in front of her to the tattoo artist that must be Henry. "I can see you're hard at work."

The young woman jerked up from the table and glared at Kyra. "Do you mind?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." She pulled out her badge. "How old are you?"

"Old enough." She pulled up her jeans and glared at Henry. "I'll be in the back when you're finished."

Henry Andrews was average-looking, not the big biker type she'd expected. Round, steel-framed glasses perched on his nose, which was almost too small for his face. He tried to smile for her as he put aside his tools and pulled off his gloves.

"She's eighteen."

"I'm not here about her. I'm here about Stacey Valteau."

“Not familiar.” He stood and walked over to a desk. “When did she get work done here?”

“Sometime during Mardi Gras.”

“I keep a database on all the jobs we do -- complete with pictures.” He called up a program and typed in her name. The results came back negative. “She didn’t get work done here.”

“Her brother was specific about the location. Do you have records for Janie Monroe or Donna LaRoux?”

He paused. “Those are the women who were murdered.”

“Good, I’m glad to see you can read. Now, look them up.” She watched him do both searches and wasn’t surprised when nothing showed up. “Do all of your employees use this system to input sales?”

“Yes, and they all do it. Our work is unique art, and we take great pride in it.”

“Inspector Moray.”

Kyra turned to the curtained entrance. Ana was standing there, her mouth firm. “Yes, Constable?”

“I’ve found something you need to look at.”

Kyra nodded and followed Ana out of the room. She wasn’t surprised when Henry trotted along behind her. The customers were gone, and a closed sign was posted on the door. Ana was standing by a section of pictures. Kyra’s eye narrowed as she caught sight of the picture that held Ana’s attention. It was a near replica of the dolphin the lab artist had produced with Janie’s mother.

Kyra’s gaze drifted to a sleek black cat with jewel-green eyes, and then to a dragon with fanciful fairy wings and light blue skin. “Who did these?”

“Aaron did those.”

“Aaron who?”

“Aaron Belton. He’s a student, works for me mostly during the summer. He did some extra hours over the last Mardi Gras to get some money for a spring break thing in Florida.” Henry motioned to the section. “He did those six during Mardi Gras this year. It’s probably some of his best work.”

“Do you still have these images stored digitally?”

“Yes.”

“I want all the pictures that were taken during Mardi Gras. I’ll need a list of all the people you’ve employed since January of this year.”

“My employees have a right to privacy. I’m not just going to turn their names over to you without a reason.”

"You can do it willingly, or I can have a CSU unit in here with a warrant tearing your place to shreds within an hour." She met his gaze. "I also want a copy of that database."

"I won't do it."

Kyra turned and faced him completely. "I have three bodies and a jar full of ash and bone. Four victims inside a week, all killed by the same sick son of a bitch." She jerked the picture of Janie Monroe's tattoo off the wall. "He cuts off their skin when he's done. He takes this art, as you call it, off their bodies."

Henry paled. "Will a copy on mini-disk do, or would you prefer a printout?"

"The mini-disk will be fine."

* * * * *

The keycard for the lock to Noel's house had been secured to the bottom of a concrete alligator. A very large concrete alligator. Kyra grimaced and rubbed the small of her back as she walked up the sidewalk to the small ranch-style home. It was in a nice neighborhood, in a middle-class part of town. Stacy had grown up cherished but not particularly spoiled. There were no lights on in the house.

"The last time I was here, it was for Joy's funeral. You would have liked her. They were a happy couple." Kyra shook her head as she shoved the keycard into the lock and the light flashed green. The locks popped, and she pushed open the door. The house was neat and sparse in décor. Kyra remembered the entire home being more cluttered; Joy Valteau had been something of a collector.

They found Stacy's room at the back of the house, a stolen yield sign prominently nailed to the door. Kyra laughed softly. "Why are kids so fascinated with street signs?"

"Who knows?" Ana shrugged. "I was always too scared to do anything illegal."

The room was a study in chaos. Discarded clothes were tossed over most of the surfaces. "Look for her p-pc." Kyra turned the lights on full and picked her way across the room to a small desk. A personal compu-station dominated most of the desk space. "We'll need to get a download of the station for Dr. Marcos to work on. She doesn't have any incoming messages."

"She probably has them being transferred to her comm-u or the p-pc." Ana picked up a backpack off the floor and dumped the contents onto the bed, the only surface in the room that wasn't covered in clothes. "Well." She pulled on a pair of gloves, then picked up a holo-button and displayed it. "Yet another girl who isn't old enough to vote with a button for the mayor's campaign."

Kyra frowned and turned to look at her. "Interesting." She watched Ana processing Stacy's backpack for a few seconds before she sat down at the compu-station and pulled on her own gloves. Activating the station, she waited patiently while it engaged and the built-in keyboard slid out. "She's got her station coded."

"She was seventeen."

"So?" Kyra turned in her chair to look at Ana.

Ana shrugged and motioned around the room. "All seventeen-year-olds assume they have secrets that must be kept from their parents."

Kyra turned back to the screen. "Maybe she did." She checked her comm-u for the time. "Let's finish this up and go off duty for the night. I'll send a team over in the morning to get the station's contents."

"I put in a request for a first-level background on Aaron Belton."

"Good. I'll certainly want to talk to him."

* * * * *

Sundays were supposed to be Kyra's day of relaxation. Often she would go to Glory's salon and get herself massaged, exfoliated, buffed, and generally pleased with creams that made her skin soft to the touch. Instead, she was sitting at her compu-station at home, inputting data from her p-pc and itching to get back to work. She knew if she showed up at the station, the commander would hear about it and she'd get a lecture.

Her home unit was just as powerful as the one she had at work, and it was easy to connect to the department and her files. Even though Kyra had worked very hard to keep her job out of her apartment, she now sat in a nightie going over the autopsy report for Janie Monroe. There was nothing new in the formal report. The oral she'd gotten from Desi and Jeffrey had been thorough.

There was still no answer on the background check for Aaron Belton. She hated having to wait.

The soft buzz of her comm-u shook her from her thoughts, and she stood and retrieved the wrist unit from her nightstand. She hit engage as soon as her earpiece was firmly in place. "Constable Salanti," the comm-u announced.

Kyra frowned. She was really starting to hate that computerized voice in her ear. It was time she programmed the thing with her own voice. "Ana, what's up?"

"So, I'm sitting here going insane. I accessed Janie Monroe's financials and noticed that she rented a hotel room at the Continental Suites on Canal Street every other Thursday afternoon for a three-hour period. It occurred to me that we could go check that out. Maybe one of the staff ..."

"Excellent. I'll pick you up in ten minutes."

"No. I'll pick *you* up in ten minutes."

Kyra chuckled. "Okay, you win."

Ana whipped up to the curb in her sassy, cherry-red 2142 Corvette convertible just as Kyra was exiting the building. "I thought I'd introduce you to the love of my life."

"It's beautiful."

"I restored it myself." Ana patted the dash. "She looks like a dream and rides like a monster."

Kyra settled herself in the passenger seat and pulled on her harness. "I can't even think when I last rode in a convertible."

Offering her a hair clip, Ana put the car in drive and shot out into traffic. "It belonged to my great-grandfather. I got it in the will. Man, were my brothers pissed."

Kyra pulled up her hair and watched with some amusement as Ana and her monster negotiated the bustling Sunday morning traffic. "I figured you'd be in church."

"Already been. I attend the six a.m. Mass. If I don't go early, I don't go at all." She shrugged and gunned the car through a yellow signal. "And if I don't go, my mother finds out and calls to lecture me."

"She's in New York. How could she *find* out?"

"The only thing I can figure is that she can feel my guilt all the way up there." Ana motioned to the dash workstation and grinned. "That and the charging system are the only nonstandard parts on the whole car. When I first got it, it was still running on *gas*!"

Kyra shook her head and winced when Ana cut off a man in a large, all-terrain vehicle. "You're going to get us killed."

"Nah, they'd have to catch us first." She changed lanes abruptly again before swinging into the parking lot of the hotel with practiced ease.

Kyra pulled the clip from hair and dropped it in the middle console. "You are insane."

"Yeah, it sort of runs in the family."

They exited the vehicle and looked toward the entrance of the hotel. "They're probably going to make us get a warrant."

"Done." Ana waved her p-pc. "I caught Judge Franken after Mass this morning and got him to sign off on it."

"Very efficient." Kyra laughed. "When exactly did you access Janie Monroe's financials?"

"I'm going to plead the fifth," Ana muttered. Kyra glared at her. "Okay, fine, so I didn't get much sleep last night."

"You realize that obsession isn't healthy."

"It doesn't seem to be detrimental to *your* health."

The lobby of the hotel was beautifully appointed and had the appearance of an elegant and luxurious establishment. However, since Kyra knew they rented rooms by the hour and

by the day, the scene was ruined. She supposed most couples meeting in a hotel like this would consider it a romantic adventure. It was cheap and tawdry despite its trappings.

She pulled out her badge and laid it out on the counter in front of the clerk. "Is there a manager on duty?"

"No. But there is a manager on call."

Kyra looked at the young man's nametag. "Well, Thaddeus, I'd like you to give your manager a call and tell her that I'm here."

"Right away, Inspector."

Ana watched him hurry away and nudged Kyra. "When do I get to bully people?"

"When you get a shiny gold badge."

"Man, I gotta take that test."

Thaddeus came back to the counter and cleared his throat nervously. "The manager is on her way. In the meantime, is there anything that I can do for you?"

Ana pulled out her p-pc and pulled up an image of Janie Monroe when she was alive and turned it to face him. "Have you seen this woman before?"

He frowned and then nodded slowly. "Well, yes, I have."

"Have you seen her here, in the hotel?" Kyra asked.

Reaching out, he took the p-pc and studied the image closer. "I don't know. I'm sorry." He handed the device back to Ana and shook his head. "We have a lot of traffic during the afternoon and evening hours. If you have a name, we can look it up."

"Janie Monroe." Kyra watched him move to a compu-station. "You haven't asked to see our warrant."

Thaddeus looked toward her. "The manager told me to give you anything you asked for."

"Why?"

"Well, you do own seventy percent of the hotel," a woman said as she walked out of the back office directly behind Thaddeus.

Kyra's mouth dropped open and then snapped closed quickly. "Actually, my grandmother owns seventy percent of the establishment."

"And you are her only heir."

"You're the manager?"

"Yes, I live on the property. I have a private entry. My name is Janice Friendly." She held out her hand and smiled when Kyra took it. "I hope that Thaddeus has done his level best to assist you."

"I just need some information on a woman who rented a room here, frequently."

"I trust that your search warrant is, in fact, in order?"

“Yes.”

“Good. Then the rest is easy to take care of.” She walked over to Thaddeus. “Well?”

“There hasn’t been a Janie Monroe registered at the hotel in the last two years.”

“Her credit card statement indicates that she was here at least every other Thursday for the past eight months.” Ana moved down the counter to stand in front of him. “Can you check by credit card number?”

“Yes, of course.”

Ana called up the number and then gave her p-pc over to the clerk. She looked toward Kyra. “We should have assumed she wouldn’t have used her real name.”

“Yeah, using a false name would add to the mystery and excitement.” Kyra sighed and looked toward Janice. “Is my grandmother aware that you lease rooms in this hotel by the hour?”

“Yes, of course. Our biggest clientele base is the sex service down the street. We have a license for sex sales as long as both parties are of age and the service is being rendered by a duly authorized escort.”

Kyra swallowed back a mouthful of curse words and turned to look at Ana. “Results?”

“The room she paid for was always registered to man named Jake Waterman.” She motioned to Thaddeus. “He’s transmitting the records to my p-pc.”

“I’ll need copies of your security recordings of the lobby on the days she was here.”

“We don’t have any.” Janice raised an eyebrow when Kyra turned to glare at her. “Our clientele would hardly feel comfortable if we had vid-surveillance in our lobby. We run an old- fashioned business.”

Kyra settled down in the passenger seat and turned to look at Ana with a frown. “An old-fashioned business?”

“Well, they do call it the oldest profession.” Ana chuckled when Kyra growled. “You honestly didn’t know?”

“Hell, no, I didn’t know my grandmother owned a freaking brothel!”

“Now, technically, it’s not a brothel. They just provide ...” Ana trailed off when she chanced a glance in Kyra’s direction. “I swear I won’t tell anyone.”

“You’re damn right you won’t.” She crossed her arms over her breasts and looked out into traffic. “We’ll need a full background check for Jake Waterman.”

* * * * *

“It’s not a big deal, you know.”

Kyra closed her eyes and shook her head. “Well, it isn’t *your* grandmother who owns a whorehouse.”

“Whorehouses aren’t legal, just like street hookers aren’t legal. Escort services *are* legal, and legalizing them did a lot for women’s rights. It definitely ensures a better standard of living.”

“Just because it’s pretty and legal doesn’t make it more than it is.” She wiggled on the stool she was sitting on and leaned forward on Alex’s breakfast bar. He was cooking dinner for them. “You know we could have ordered out?”

“You don’t trust my cooking?”

“I’ve never eaten your cooking. So, we’ll just have to see.” She rolled a bottle of water between her hands while looking at him. “You do look sexy in that apron.”

“Talk to me about what’s bothering you.”

“It probably isn’t a conversation you want to have on an empty stomach.”

“Don’t treat me like I’m weak.”

Kyra’s brows shot up at that. She took a deep breath. “I didn’t realize that I was. Though it may be unclear at times, I am aware that you have the dick in this relationship.”

Alex turned and leaned against the counter. “Okay, fine, so we agree. Tell me.”

“I’m getting nowhere fast on this son of a bitch.” She put the bottle down and frowned. “All of this is coming at me fast and mean. He’s working undeterred by my efforts, as if he knows every move I make and all the ones I would have made. There’s always evidence, but never enough to lead me to him.”

“Is it possible that he does know what you’re thinking and doing?”

“I would like to say no. I mean, the city did spend forty million dollars last year securing the police network for the city. If he’s broken into the system ...” Kyra shrugged. “Hell, Computer Sentinel spends a great deal of time testing the system. They haven’t found any holes yet, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t any.”

“Okay, let’s say for the sake of argument that your computer is secure.”

“That would mean that he’s inside the system in some way.”

“Or he has someone inside for him.”

“No.” Kyra shook her head.

“Come on, Kyra, you know it makes sense. If he knows the details of your investigations, it’s because he has access to your work.”

“That would mean I have a bad cop on my hands,” Kyra snapped. “And that’s bullshit. District 4 is a large house, and we cover a lot of the city, but it isn’t so large that a bad cop would go unnoticed for very long.”

Alex went back to his grill-top and nodded. “I’m sure you’re right.”

Kyra rubbed her face. “Fuck, you know I’m not.”

He laughed. "Are you telling me that you hadn't already considered that?"

"I haven't let myself think about it." The admission was something of an embarrassment; she prided herself on thinking of everything and anything. "I'm not a brick in the blue wall. I sure as hell wouldn't shield a bad cop if I knew of one."

"But you haven't made any effort to find out if there is one."

"Fuck off."

He grinned. "I figured we'd get to the physical activities after dinner."

Kyra stretched out her legs and leaned back on the bench in the shower stall as Alex entered. "I love your shower. It's like a palace in here."

"I had it designed after a shower bath I found in a hotel in Morocco." He pushed a few buttons and started the showerheads. "It's a little different, but I think I only improved on the design."

"The steak was good."

"Good. I doubt the food poisoning will set in immediately."

She laughed at his dry tone and stood from the bench. Slowly she moved her hand down his back to his ass. "That is one great ass, Mr. Waters."

"Yours isn't bad, either."

"You realize that I do three hundred squats a week to keep my ass looking like that." She gasped a little when he pressed her against the shower wall. "The tile is a little cold."

"It'll warm up." He nuzzled her neck and then bit gently into her shoulder. "You are getting a full eight hours of sleep tonight."

"I never get a full eight hours."

"You will."

She laughed softly as he lifted her off the floor and coaxed her legs around his waist. "How are you going to arrange that?"

Cupping her ass with both hands, he slid into her and stilled. "I thought I'd wear you out."

"I usually find sex invigorating," she warned.

"The first couple of times will be," he promised softly.

She gripped his shoulders and tightened her legs around him as he started to move. The quick and easy glide of his cock inside her pushed pleasure up through her pelvis and over her stomach.

"I've never had a woman like you. Always so wet and ready for me."

"Just looking at you does this to me." The admission came in a near whisper. She tightened her legs around his thrusting hips and pressed against the wall for leverage.

Alex ran his hands over her thighs and back up to cup her ass, all the while pushing his cock into her with steady, relentless thrusts. “Are you going to come for me?”

“You always make me come.” She arched against him as he buried himself to the hilt inside her and ground his body against hers. “So close.”

“I know you are.” He quickened his pace and lowered his face to the side of her neck when she started to shake.

Kyra moaned and dug her nails into his shoulders as she came. “Yes.”

Chapter Eleven

Desi Marcos had gotten ten good hours of sleep on the cot in Inspector Moray's office and was a hundred percent. She had a double espresso on her left and the best fancy-ass compu-station she could wrangle out of the commander sitting in front of her. She'd spent nearly twenty minutes stroking and admiring the ENO3300 when it had arrived. The state-of-the-art compu-station had barely been out on the market for a week.

She'd also, much to her amazement, been placed on the task force for the serial killer. It was certainly the best Monday morning she'd ever had.

She closed the laptop as the rest of the team entered the room. Inspector Kyra Moray entered last with a large coffee in one hand and a canned soft drink in the other. Since being nervous would be stupid, Desi endeavored to look calm and not pop her gum as the conversation lulled to silence. The inspector had that effect on people.

"As you know, we've managed to locate the tattoo parlor that the women visited during Mardi Gras." Kyra popped the top on the soft drink. "Dr. Marcos?"

Desi blushed with pleasure. She loved being called *Doctor*. "Well, I did manage to isolate the records for our three known victims. They weren't filed under their names."

"How were they filed?"

"Bitch 1, 2, and 3." She paused, seeing the anger flash in Kyra's eyes. "I've also managed to find the other three tattoos done during Mardi Gras under the names of Bitch 4, 5, and 6." She stood and turned on the holo-projector. A box of light appeared above the table. "The three remaining tattoos are a unicorn, a rainbow, and a little fairy." The projector displayed the three images individually on each of the four side panels of the box.

"Good."

She put the projector remote aside and sat down. "Now, the bad news. Aaron Belton is dead. He died at age six."

“How?”

Ana nodded to Desi when the young woman looked her way. “His father, Jake Belton, came home and butchered the entire family twenty years ago. The house was set ablaze. The forensics team at the time was able to gather some ash and bone, but was never able to confirm that all three members of the family died in the blaze.”

“We’ll need the staff of the tattoo parlor to sit with a police artist.”

“None of the staff currently working there, except for the owner, ever met Aaron.” Ana turned to a new page in her notebook. “We’ve got interviews set up all day. The three employees that worked with Aaron during Mardi Gras have not been located; however, I did manage to work through the rest of the names the owner gave us. Of the sixteen I found, only two others had ever worked with Aaron at all. Detectives Brant and Trane will be handling those.” Ana looked up briefly as the two men in question nodded. “You have a press conference in twenty minutes, and the commander wants to meet with us first.”

“Okay, let’s go.” Kyra stood. “Dr. Marcos, you can use my desk for the day. You’ll find several mini-disks of information on people who knew the victims. I’d like you isolate all the records that Aaron Belton entered into the database. Send any data you find on Jake Waterman and the second-level search on Samuel Killian to me ASAP.” She paused, then picked up her p-pc. “Also, call ComSen and have them do a run over the network in this building, my office unit, and my unit at home.”

Desi’s mouth dropped open. “You think the killer is hacking us?”

“It’s an avenue I’d like to explore,” Kyra answered carefully. “Also, I want a list of all personnel citywide who have accessed the files associated with this case.”

The room went dead silent, and Desi stood. “Of course, Inspector. I’ll get right on it.”

“So, what’s her doctorate in?”

“Desi Marcos is a genius. I can’t believe she works in public service, but good for her.” Kyra checked her folders as she walked beside Ana. “She got her first doctorate in forensic science, her second in criminal justice, and her third in medicine. The FBI has been courting her since she came through the Academy and joined the NOPD six months ago. She’s been working with Parker for the past few weeks, but apparently likes to move around and try new things.”

“The FBI must have offered a bunch of money.”

“Doesn’t need any.” Kyra paused in front of the commander’s office. “I’m going to try to keep her in Major Crimes.”

“Do you think we have a bad cop in the station?”

The commander opened the door before she could answer the question. The room was full of brass, but she’d expected no less. “Good morning, gentlemen.”

“Inspector Moray.” Joseph Denis, chief of police for the city, offered her his hand. “It’s good to see you. I expected it to be under better conditions.” He turned his attention to Ana. “Constable Salanti.”

“Sir.” Ana took the proffered hand and flicked her gaze at Kyra just once.

“Kyra, you know the deputy mayor.”

She nodded. “Good morning, Mr. Deller.” Kyra took a seat at the conference table in the room and waited until everyone else was seated. “We have determined that we are dealing with one killer. It has also been determined the killer is picking his victims out of a series of women that were tattooed during Mardi Gras by an individual calling himself Aaron Belton.”

“You want to release that to the media?”

“I’d like to.”

“The mayor does not want us to confirm that we are dealing with a serial killer. It would be bad for the city’s image if we openly admitted to having such a monster here preying our populace,” Lloyd Deller stated firmly.

“I’d like to live in Never-Never Land, too,” Kyra responded. “However, since we don’t, it’s our responsibility to find and protect the women he has marked for slaughter.”

“We also would prefer that you not use the word *slaughter*.”

Kyra opened the folder in front of her, selected a picture of Stacy Valteau, and tossed it across the table in front of him. “Tell me, Mr. Deller, just how would you feel if that were your daughter?”

He paled and turned the picture over. “There is no need for you to be hostile. We want the same thing.”

“Do we?”

“Of course. I won’t have you imply otherwise. It is your responsibility to inform the public while maintaining an aura of calm. As far as you are concerned, although these murders could be connected, you cannot confirm that he is a serial killer. You don’t have to outright deny it, either.” He cleared his throat. “You will not release the information about the tattoos.”

Kyra glanced briefly at her commander before standing. “Constable Salanti, if you would, go down to the pressroom. Inform them that I’ll join them in a few moments.”

She took the picture off the table and tucked it back in the folder. “I will do as instructed.” All three men relaxed. “However, when the next body is found, and there will be another, I’m not going to keep the press away. I’ll let them take pictures and give on-air reports right next to the body. Then I will stand there by that dead woman, and I will tell the entire city how the mayor’s office tied my hands and didn’t allow me to release data that could have saved the woman’s life.” She focused on the deputy mayor, her eyes hard and filled with fury. “I will explain that the deputy mayor thought the people of New Orleans too

stupid to understand the threat, and that he was afraid they would panic and not re-elect the mayor. He was afraid he'd lose his job, you see, too afraid to care about the women he was letting remain at risk."

"You will not threaten me!" He stood, furious in his own right.

"I'm not threatening you, asshole. I am making you a promise. If I stand over another dead body put there by that fucking monster because of your asinine politics, I will tear the mayor's office to shreds."

"Perhaps we can reach a compromise."

Finally, the Commander spoke. "Okay." Kyra turned to look at him, then sat down. He had earned her respect, and he would receive it.

"We can display the three tattoos in question and ask the women to report to the station to answer a few questions. Let the press and anyone else draw their own conclusions. No one can disagree with the fact that we need to get these women off the street and into protective custody."

"That would be acceptable," Deller murmured. He glared at Kyra. "After this case is over, Inspector, you'll be lucky to still have a badge."

"You will not sit in my office and threaten anyone under my command!" Baker snapped. "She's doing her job. And if you think you can get rid of her, you might want to ask the mayor who took a hit from an EP hunting rifle for him last spring."

Deller straightened. "She was wearing a vest."

Kyra cleared her throat and shook her head. "I'm going out to talk to the press now. Commander, it might be best if you came with me. The city likes to see you on the vid-panel, looking in charge."

He glared at Deller one more time and followed Kyra out of the office. Once in the elevator, he broke into a fair imitation of the weasel. "She was wearing a vest."

"Well, I was." Kyra laughed. "God, he's a horrid little man."

"You don't need to worry about your job."

"Oh, I know. If the mayor fires me, my grandmother will stop fucking him," she responded softly as the doors opened.

Leaving Commander Baker howling with laughter, she went into the large pressroom and stopped at the podium. Several television stations had set up in the back of the room.

"I have a brief statement to make, and then I'll take a limited number of questions." She cleared her throat and focused on Ana, who had positioned herself in the back of the room. "As you are aware, we've had a series of murders in the city. At this point, I am not willing to discuss the cases, as they are ongoing. I would ask the press to please respect the families of the victims and give them the privacy they need to grieve. We are also asking that any woman bearing a tattoo resembling the ones included in the press kit please contact us so

that we may ask a few basic questions.” She planted both hands on the podium. “Questions?” Thirty hands shot up. She hadn’t expected less. “Sally.”

“Inspector Moray, is it true the three women murdered in the French Quarter over the past several days were murdered by the same man?”

“That is one of the many avenues we are currently pursuing.”

“Would you classify him as a serial killer?”

Kyra paused for a moment, letting them get a clear sense of her hesitation. “Currently, we are unable to make such a determination.” She moved her gaze around the room. “Jim Daily.”

“Are the women you are asking to contact the station in danger of being victims?”

“As I stated before, we would like to ask the women who have tattoos like those provided to come in for questioning. They are not wanted in connection with a crime. They will not be charged with a crime, and they may contact me personally if they’d rather not come to the station.”

“Did the women who were murdered have tattoos?”

That question was deceptively easy to answer. “Not when we found them.” She held up her hand. “One more question. Jeff Marks, and ask me something I haven’t already answered.”

Jeff stepped forward. “What would you like to tell the people of New Orleans about these murders?”

Kyra raised an eyebrow and waited until Jeff’s cameraman had chosen his shot. Silently she wondered when she’d gotten so freaking cozy with the press. “The only thing I have to give these women is justice, and they *will* have it.”

“What would you say to the killer?”

She narrowed her gaze on Jeff; it was so tempting, but giving the killer her personal attention would have been inappropriate. She turned and left the room.

Ana watched the reporters mill around the room, discussing what had been said. She went to the front and gathered the pictures and the folder that Kyra had forgotten.

“Hey, are you Moray’s new partner?”

She stiffened and turned to look at the reporter who had spoken. “I am.”

“What’s she not telling us?”

“Go ask her.”

“No way, I’d like to keep all of my body parts.” Jeff leaned on the podium. “What’s it like working with her?”

“Ask me next week. I’ve only been her partner for two days.” Ana frowned. She wasn’t even sure if it had been two days.

She hurried out of the large pressroom and hit the elevator that would take her back upstairs. The last thing she needed to do was get tangled up with a reporter and end up being an unnamed police source. Grimacing, she exited the elevator and walked purposefully across the large office space that housed the detectives in Major Crimes. Phil was at one of the desks now.

On impulse, she dropped into his visitor chair and slouched a little. "She's mad."

"Chocolate espresso usually puts her in a good mood." Phil leaned back in his chair.

"If she comes out before I get back, tell her I ran next door for a snack."

Kyra was pacing in her office when Phil stuck his head in. "I'm in no mood."

"So I heard. Mayor giving you a hard time?"

She kicked the file cabinet next to her. "The candy-ass sent the deputy mayor down to tell me what to do."

Phil came in and shut the door. "How's things working out with Salanti?"

"She's not nearly as entertaining as you." Kyra rubbed her face. "Eager, good, a sharp eye." She motioned at her empty desk. "Where's the genius?"

"Oh, she's down in the gym on her lunch break."

Kyra sat down in her chair and looked toward Phil. "Are you getting any flak about being pulled off the case?"

"No -- well, not once some of the guys caught a look at some of the pictures. Mutilated women don't set well with any man. You knew Stacey Valteau."

"Yeah." Kyra's mouth firmed up. "I did."

"How's Noel?"

"Neal had to hospitalize him." Kyra rubbed her face. "I've never come so close to losing it on a notification in my life."

"But you maintained."

"I did."

"That's what counts. No victim's family wants to see a cop who can't handle the job. He'll get better, and he'll remember how strong you were, and how lucky they are to have you working Stacey's case."

Kyra nodded. "You're much better at the ass-kissing now that you don't have to sit in here with me."

He looked over his shoulder. "Speaking of which, I sent your partner off to get you a chocolate espresso."

Ana groaned a little when she came out of the bakery and saw Kyra's transport parked out front. She put on a smile and tried to get over the fact that she'd been looking forward to sitting at *her* desk while she ate a snack. Kyra was on her comm-u when Ana opened the door.

"Look, I don't give a damn if you don't like it. If I come down there and there isn't a closed sign on your door, you'll pay for it in every possible way I can imagine. Trust me. I have a healthy imagination." She disconnected her comm-u with a savage punch of her index finger and looked toward Ana. "The fucking tattoo guy is trying to get on the vid-panel."

"Oh."

"Yeah." Kyra rubbed her face and took the pastry and espresso Ana offered. "I can't, legitimately, do a damn thing about it. The mayor is going to shit twice and die."

"So, are we heading to City Hall to watch?"

"No. We are going to go see a man about taxidermy."

"Well, it's gross." Ana sighed and settled into the seat as she continued to speak. "All you need is methanol and glycerin to soak the skin in once it's been cleaned."

"How do you know?"

"My neighbor across the hall is an avid hunter. Cures his own skins."

"You shouldn't spend too much time with him."

Ana laughed and shrugged. "A lot of men hunt."

"Yeah, but they don't all cure animal skins in the kitchen." Kyra shoved the gearshift into drive and shot out into traffic. "Anyway, I made an appointment to speak with Billy Joe of Billy Joe's Taxidermy. He lives out in the middle of no-fucking-where."

"What do you think of Dr. Marcos?"

"She's young, but brilliant and very shiny. I think that working with us will probably rub some of that off." She shrugged. "Why?"

"Just curious."

* * * * *

"You should get those leather pants."

Kyra snorted and looked at the ones Ana had pointed out, then raised an eyebrow. They actually looked nice. "They're ridiculously overpriced."

"Yeah, but they're sexy." Ana grinned.

"Can I help you ladies?"

Kyra flipped open her badge and let her gaze slide over the man who had come from the back of the store. He was a wiry little man with a shock of solid white hair on his head. "I'm here to see Billy Joe Canton."

“Ah, the police lady.” He motioned with hand. “Come on back to my office.”

Kyra glanced at Ana, looking over her uniform. “Suppose he thought you were dressing up early for Halloween?”

They followed him behind the counter and into the back of his store. His office was a cramped affair with paper covering nearly every available surface. Billy Joe cleaned off two chairs by tossing several stacks of paper toward another overwhelmed desk. “Just saw you on the vid-panel.”

Kyra cleared her throat. “I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Shoot.” He picked up an empty drink bottle and spit into it.

“What’s the process for curing skin?”

“What sort of skin?”

“Theoretically, human skin.”

He sat up straight and cleared his throat. “Well. Theoretically, you’d treat human skin much the same way you’d do snakeskin. Both are delicate. Fourteen days soaking in a container filled with methanol and then wrap it around a cylinder for a week so it dries out but doesn’t shrink.”

“Is methanol a controlled substance?”

“No, you can buy it in most stores.” He leaned back in his chair and spit into the bottle again. “However, theoretically, the individual in question could use his or her own urine to cure the skin. After distilling human urine for about two weeks, it’s just like ammonia.”

“Do you deal with a lot of hunters in the area?”

“You mean conservation specialists.” He grinned.

Kyra had to laugh. “Fine, do you deal with the area conservation specialists?”

“I get a lot of work during deer and gator season. Don’t see much from the other hunts, though. I sell about twenty rifles a year, sometimes more. Also stock gel ammo for crossbows and the government-approved hunting rifle.”

“Has anyone come in and requested information about curing skin?”

“No. I get a few calls now and again. I tell them to get on the Internet and look it up.”

“Who does your leather tooling?”

“My wife.” He grinned. “You should get those pants.”

Kyra tossed the box with her new leather pants onto the backseat and glanced at Ana. “The pants are top secret.”

“You aren’t one those people who complains about the conservationist hunting, are you?”

“No, but I don’t want to take any flak for spending a thousand credits on leather pants.”

“Oh.” Ana pulled out her p-pc and flipped open the leather cover to scroll through her incoming messages. “Dr. Marcos has determined that Janie Monroe did in fact use her bank card to pay for the tattoo from Tat’s the Way.”

Kyra pulled out her p-pc and offered it to Ana. “Check and see if Neal forwarded that list of Stacey’s friends.”

Chapter Twelve

Kyra hit the manual answer on her comm-u and grimaced at the tone that buzzed in her ear. "Please stand by to speak with Dr. Nelson Lance."

"God, I hate compu communication centers," she muttered as she pulled out onto the highway.

"It's my belief that people use those things to impress their importance on other people."

Kyra laughed, then sobered when a human voice erupted from the earpiece. "Yes, Dr. Lance?"

"Good afternoon, Inspector. I'm a physician at St. Martin's. My patient Cecelia LaRoux would like to see you."

Kyra raised an eyebrow. "Is she coherent?"

"Yes, medicated and lucid. She's prepared to talk about her daughter and has acknowledged that she's dead."

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

Cecelia LaRoux was sitting beside her bed. The room was private, which Kyra appreciated. "I see that William is making sure you're taken care of."

The woman jerked abruptly and turned to look at her. "Inspector Moray."

"Yes. Do you remember me?"

"I think so." She waved her hand. "Things are a little fuzzy. Please sit."

Kyra glanced briefly at Ana, who nodded and stepped out of the room. "I was pleased to hear that you're feeling better."

She nodded. "Yes, the doctors here tell me that I had an emotional breakdown. I heard that I struck you."

"You weren't the first -- hell, you aren't even the last." Kyra sat down in a chair in front of her. "What did you want to tell me about Donna?"

Cecelia sucked in a breath. "I just ... I needed to see you again and hear what you had to say about what happened to her. I don't know how much I can tell you about her life. It appears she kept a great many secrets from me."

Kyra paused as she considered what to say her. "She wasn't raped."

The tension seeped out of Cecelia's body in a swoosh of air. "Okay. Okay. Thank you."

"It is very likely that she was unconscious when she died." Kyra leaned forward and took a deep breath. "She was the first victim, but there have been two more."

"Yes. One of the nurses told me. I want to attend to her funeral details. William says her body hasn't been released yet."

"No, but it will be soon. Do you remember Donna ever speaking about something or someone special in her life?" Kyra watched the woman struggle to maintain and was pleased when she seemed to do so.

"No, she worked and went to school. I wanted her to succeed and not get wrapped up in personal crap before she was ready for it." Cecelia grimaced. "Looking back, I can see that I didn't really try to figure out what she wanted."

"I'm sure you had her best interests in mind, and she knew that."

"Yeah." Cecelia sighed. "You'll catch this man?"

"I won't stop looking for the person who killed Donna."

She was silent for a moment before inclining her head. "Thank you."

* * * * *

"This guy hit you?" Ana watched the man incredulously.

Kyra shrugged and nodded as she watched Jerry Capshaw rage around the small room he'd been placed in. "Doctor Lance, are you sure he wasn't slipped something?"

"Yes. His toxicology screens are clear. The fact is that until I can determine what set him off, I can't even begin to start treating him. From what we've been able to gather, he wasn't exposed to anything that could cause a break like this."

"A break?"

"Oh, he's completely broken with reality. He still thinks the president is Denise Crow."

The first female president of the NAU, Kyra recalled, she'd served one term some fifteen years before.

Kyra raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"I've managed to put together quite a large file on the man. He served during the war with Cuba and North Korea. He was unsuccessfully tried for war crimes. I spoke with his commanding officer and the JAG officer who tried him. They both agreed that he was uncontrollable, but could not account for this."

"So I take it he wasn't one of the men who protested the invasion?"

"Oh, no, he was as gung-ho as they come." Nelson Lance shook his head. "I just don't know. I doubt he'll ever recover from this. He has a strong hatred for you. He considers you a threat to him, a rival for his girlfriend's affection."

"He doesn't have a girlfriend."

"Yes, I've spoken with Ms. James. She's refused to come in and speak with me about Mr. Capshaw."

"Leave her alone, Dr. Lance. You don't need Glory for this." Kyra took one more look at Jerry and then motioned to Ana. "Come on."

They were silent until they were free of the building. There was nothing like being in a mental institution to make a body really appreciate personal freedom. She unlocked her transport as they approached it. "We're going to swing by Still Waters. That okay with you?"

"Yep, I love looking at sexy men."

Kyra laughed.

Sexy man, indeed.

Marcus Waters was stripped to the waist, with a water hose in hand, out front when she pulled up to the curb. He was meticulously spraying off the white bricks of the building. Kyra leaned against her vehicle as Ana hopped out.

"Constable, you'll have to give this man a ticket."

Ana pulled out her p-pc. "Indecent exposure or providing a public distraction?"

Marcus laughed. "You ladies are lucky I like cops."

"You guys serving dinner?"

"Yeah, he just reopened. Got a few reporters sniffing around." Marcus looked at Kyra as he spoke.

"I can handle reporters."

Ana trailed along behind Kyra, getting an eyeful of Marcus while she was at it. Once inside, she sighed. "The Waters men sure are pretty."

Kyra's gaze summed up the evening crowd quickly. "Want to meet my nana?"

"Sharon Moray?"

"Yeah."

"Do I look okay?"

Kyra laughed. "You look fine." She nodded in her grandmother's direction. "Come along, then."

"She's with the mayor!"

"Yeah, they do the horizontal tango. Every Sunday they go to church and beg forgiveness for fornication. It's all quite proper."

"She could do so much better."

"Oh, she knows it, and she makes sure he's told regularly." She put on a bright smile. "Grandmother."

Sharon stood, then glared at Mayor Henry Delacroix until he stood, as well. "Darling, you look just wonderful." She hugged Kyra and held out her hands to Ana. "You must be my baby's new partner. Aren't you darling? I heard you come from New York Dome. Don't worry." She patted Ana's hand. "We can't all be so fortunate to be born in the south. I'll make sure no one holds it against you." She kissed Ana's cheek and turned to the mayor. "Henry, get these girls some chairs."

Kyra stopped the mayor with a gentle hand. "Actually, Ana and I have a few work matters to talk over while we eat. I wouldn't want to disturb your meal with the details."

"If you're sure ..." Sharon's gaze narrowed on Kyra. "Are you getting enough sleep?"

"Just enough." She kissed her grandmother's cheek. "Promise."

Ana followed along behind Kyra and sighed. "Your nana smells nice. I wish I had a nana."

"You don't have any living grandparents?"

"Oh, yes, all four are alive and well. However, my grandmothers would never allow me to call them Nana. In fact, my mother's mother only recently allowed me to call her Grandmother instead of Patricia."

Kyra slid into the booth and grinned. "She doesn't let me call her Nana. I just do it." She held out her hand and glared at Jeff Marks. "I haven't eaten in several hours, Marks, so unless you'd like to be an appetizer, I suggest you back off."

"Come on, Kyra, your press conference today was the mother of all understatements." Jeff slid into the booth beside her. "Give me a little."

"I'm going to give you a great deal of pain if you don't get the hell out of my space." She flipped open the menu. "If you leave now with no discussion, I'll give you an exclusive one-on-one for your evening broadcast tomorrow."

He hopped up and hurried away.

Ana laughed. "Will you really?"

"Yes. I'd already planned to contact him." She set down her menu and looked around. Alex was behind the bar, looking put out.

The waitress came by, and they ordered quickly.

“He looks sort of pissed.”

“So he does.” Kyra watched him leave the bar and walk in their direction. She scooted a little further into the booth so he could sit down. “Something wrong?”

“Yeah, that guy that sat down with you has been pestering me all damn afternoon. He wants to take pictures of the alleyway.” He rubbed his face and glared at Jeff where he sat. “He asked if he could get a few pictures and get one of his men to lie down for a chalk outline.”

“The NOPD hasn’t used chalk to outline bodies in sixty years,” Ana pointed out as she stripped a straw for her drink.

“Yeah, he wants to go for a certain ambience.”

Kyra pressed her lips together firmly and looked at the wall. “If you want, I’ll kick his ass.”

“I can take care of my own.” He leaned back and looked at Ana. “Hello, again, Constable.”

Ana smiled. “You can call me Ana.”

“I have to say that you’re much nicer on the eyes than her last partner.”

“I work out.”

“I bet.”

Kyra elbowed him in the side. “Stop checking her out.”

Alex laughed. “Next time get yourself an ugly partner.”

“Ugly or beautiful, either way she’d be a distraction.” Marcus slid into the booth beside Ana, his shirt in place. “Maybe Ana should have a different partner. You know, one that won’t try to corrupt her.” He rested his hands on the table and raised an eyebrow when Kyra glared at him. “I have it on good authority, Inspector, that you are a bad influence on young people.”

Kyra laughed and pulled out her p-pc. “I’m going to give you a ticket myself.”

Ana watched her fiddle with it for a minute, then reached out to take the p-pc from her. “You probably haven’t given a ticket in six years,” she muttered as she changed the screen and filtered through the options. “Did we decide on a charge?”

“Being a pain in my ass.”

“I’m sorry to report the mayor did not sign the bill that would make being a pain in your ass specifically a crime,” Ana stated primly. “It might be fun to book him on solicitation charges. Then I could do a strip search.”

Kyra took her p-pc back and rolled her eyes. “Make a note to inform my grandmother that the mayor wasn’t cooperative.”

“What are you going to do about the deputy mayor?” Ana’s expression turned serious.

“Nothing, at the moment.” Kyra shrugged. “He can’t really hurt me.”

"Everyone heard him screaming at you." Ana blushed, then shrugged when Kyra glared. "We could get the witch to curse him."

"It's a violation of Code 234A for anyone connected with the NOPD to use Priestess Clara's services for anything other than professional reasons." Kyra frowned. "She makes me so mad. There are a hundred more important ways she can help me instead of going on and on about evil."

"Aunt Clara has her ways." Alex chuckled.

Kyra turned to stare at Alex. "Are you serious?"

"Our mother is her sister," Marcus murmured.

"Oh, for the love of God." Kyra fumed silently for a minute while Ana started giggling. The food arrived, and Kyra stared in silence at her hamburger for a minute before she picked up her knife. "You could have told me."

Alex laughed. "And exactly at what point would it have been a good time to mention that my aunt is the Voodoo queen of New Orleans?"

Since she didn't have a civil answer to that question, she pointed at him briefly with her knife. "My partner and I need to work on a case. Civilians are required to vacate the booth."

He kissed her mouth gently, a reminder of what moved between them, and slid away. "Come along, Marcus. We are no longer amusing to the Inspector."

"What a great ass," Ana murmured as they walked away.

Kyra glanced at them briefly and then cut her hamburger in half. "I was serious about the work, you know."

"I'm totally serious about the ass you, you know." Ana grinned but placed her p-pc on the table and set it to browse through her incoming messages. "Neal Valteau sent the list. Looks like I was cc'd a copy."

"Yeah." Kyra frowned at the list and shook her head. "I'll be damned."

"Probably, but I'm going to pray for you anyway."

"Samuel Killian knew Stacey Valteau."

Ana hurriedly opened the list. "Oh."

"Oh, indeed." Kyra checked her comm-u. "Get us some boxes and pack the food to go. I need to call Phil." Kyra walked purposefully across the room and, after a thought, detoured slightly to hit the reporter's table. "I want all of you out of here when I get back."

"We're eating." Jeff complained.

"Get it to go. I can't believe you, Jeff. If I can't trust you not to trivialize the deaths of these young women, you aren't getting a fucking thing from me."

"I have a job to do."

She poked at him with one finger. "So do I. The last thing I need is a dumb-ass reporter harassing a witness. He had an employee murdered, Jeff. He feels responsible even though he has no reason to be. Give the man a break, or you won't get another from me."

"Is that how it is? No one can talk to the man because you're fucking him?"

Kyra laughed then. "Keep pushing him, Jeff, and you won't have to worry about me. Oh, and you can forget about the one-on-one."

She input a transmission request to Phil on her comm-u as she stalked from the table and down the short hall that led to Alex's office. The door was ajar, so she pushed it open as the connection was made. Alex was at his desk eating, and Marcus was sprawled on a leather sofa with a plate on his stomach. "Phil, transfer Samuel Killian's school schedule to my p-pc, and put in a request for a warrant. I want access to his gym locker, outhouse, car, apartment, the grocery store where he shops, and any job locations he might currently have."

She looked toward Alex. "Have you ever employed a young man named Samuel Killian?"

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Sounds familiar." He went to his station and called up a file. "Yeah, for about six weeks when I first opened. He was fired for several unexcused absences."

"Send his file to my p-pc." She wrote her code down on a piece of paper on his desk and kissed his mouth. "You have my permission to kick the ever-living shit out of Jeff Marks if he's still here when you finish eating."

He laughed. "I don't need your permission, Inspector."

She touched his face. "I'll keep you out of jail."

"Now, that I might need." He took her hand and met her gaze. "You look ready for war. You get a good lead?"

"I think so." She looked at Marcus. "Don't hit on my partner."

"She's very attractive."

"She's also very busy."

"Not that busy!" Ana called from the hallway. She appeared in the door with a bag. "My p-pc is vibrating like crazy. Hurry up before I take a quiet moment to myself to fully enjoy the effect."

Kyra took the bag from her as she motioned her out the doorway.

Ana followed along silently, already checking the contents of her inbox. Once settled in the transport and buckled, she looked at Kyra. "I don't need a cock block, but thanks for the thought."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, I'm perfectly capable of fending off a man if I'm not interested. I'm young, but my mother didn't raise a pansy."

"I'll keep that in mind." Kyra put the vehicle in drive and shoved her p-pc into the dash docking station. The in-dash vid-screen lit up and displayed the contents of her inbox. "Open document ID-Killian43 from Alex Waters."

"Document description: employment records of Samuel Killian."

"Display and read document." Kyra grabbed the half-hamburger that Ana handed her and took a healthy bite as the computer began spitting out details.

"Samuel Killian. Employed from January 3, 2161, to February 27, 2161. Employment terminated for three unexcused absences. Last known address: 247 Langley Street, Apartment 6."

"End." Kyra grabbed handful of fries. "Do the addresses jive?"

"Yes, except there is no Langley Street. He used the same fake address for both the college and the bar." She was silent for a moment as she browsed through her incoming messages. "I'm sorry. I should have caught that name on the employment records for Still Waters when Janie Monroe was killed."

Kyra shook her head. "We only asked for the last six months of records. His name wouldn't have popped."

Ana frowned, but nodded. "The search for Waterman is complete." She sighed as she read the contents of the message. "There is no information on a 'Jake Waterman' living within four hundred miles of New Orleans."

"Toss all that to Desi Marcos."

"Where are we going?"

"I want to swing by Glory's and let her know what's going on with the ex-psycho of hers. Then we're going back to the station."

Desi Marcos fed the last bit of information she had into her computer, then decided to submit both pictures to the Face Recognition Database. The database was extensive and useless, but she'd built a better interface for it and hoped to get a hit on Aaron Belton and Samuel Killian.

The door to the office opened, and the inspector strode in, followed by her partner. "Samuel Killian and Aaron Belton were in the same elementary school together. They died within weeks of each other," Desi reported.

"That's interesting." Kyra sat down at her desk and frowned over the information. "Do we have an image to work with for Aaron Belton?"

"Yeah, the imagist brought it up about thirty minutes ago." Desi picked the folder up off her desk and carried it to Kyra. "Frank Corey worked the interviews, so we have traditional drawings instead of computer images."

Kyra nodded and took the file. "Yes, I asked for him. I thought the witnesses in the tattoo parlor would relate better to him because of his talent." She opened the folder and took in a deep breath. "Well, now, that's a very familiar face."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah." Kyra turned to the large vid-panel on her office wall that she hardly ever used.

Ana reached out for the drawing and looked at it as the screen filled with Samuel's face. "It's the same guy."

"Yes." Kyra stared at the vid-panel for a moment and then focused on Desi. "Did the second-level search request get approval?"

"Yes. You should have the results in less than an hour."

Kyra looked at Ana. "I want to see the records on the Belton fire."

"They aren't digital. I have a research request in at Police Plaza." Ana went back to her desk. "I was promised that it would be sent over as soon as it was pulled."

Kyra nodded. New Orleans had been all paper between 2132 and 2144, due to the EMP weapon detonation over the southern NAU in 2132. The city hadn't had the resources to fix the problems until after the third civil war had ended. She picked up her coffee cup. "There's a puzzle twisting around in my head. Something about the two names ... Desi, check to see if any other children died the year that Samuel and Aaron did."

Desi nodded and went back to her station. "Particular parameters?"

"Children Aaron's age who attended his school."

Desi was silent for a moment and then cleared her throat. "Two other male classmates died in the same year. Jason Keener and Robert Phillips Jr."

"Yes." Kyra nodded and stood. She took her coffee with her and began to pace in front of her desk. "Four children died within weeks of each other, first Aaron and then the rest. It was all over the papers at the time. People were in an uproar about the violence in the city, and four murdered children in the headlines was so much fuel for that fire."

"Then the reorganization began."

"Yes, about six months later." She looked back to the vid-panel. "Samuel, Jason, and Robert are all cold-case files. They should be in the computer. No unsolved murder that was less than twenty years old was left in a box."

"I'll pull them," Ana murmured.

Kyra nodded. "Check to see if anyone is using the personal ID information for Jason or Robert, too."

"What are you thinking?" Ana input the query at her station.

"That Aaron Belton was the only child of the four that we didn't have a body for. He was also close friends with the other three children, if I remember correctly. If he survived that night, he might have reached out to them."

"You think they were killed because of him?"

"The three of them would have been viewed as a risk. If one of the parents survived the fire as well, they wouldn't have wanted to deal with the questions that would have inevitably come up about that night."

"You think the other three children were killed to protect the fact that Aaron survived that fire." Ana turned to look at her. "That's really sick."

"Yes." She stared at the image of the man pretending to be Samuel Killian. "Very sick. I don't think it was the mother, but I'll need to speak with Clara about her place in the Voodoo community."

"The father, then."

"Yes, but then it's all speculation at this point." Kyra grimaced and stood. "Twenty years ago, the city wouldn't have been prepared to investigate a crime like this with any real skill. With the corruption and the lack of funds, people and equipment would have been next to impossible to get."

"So you think the ashes you received in the mail are a symbol of his mother."

"Yes. I imagine the woman in that jar is actually the first victim. I think he may have recreated the death of his mother."

Desi looked up from her station and cleared her throat for attention. "I have hits on both of the IDs. Jason Keener was arrested four years ago for public lewdness. He apparently flashed some little girls getting off a school transport. Robert Phillips is currently working ... shit."

"What?"

"Robert Phillips Jr. is currently working on the mayor's re-election campaign as an event coordinator."

* * * * *

Robert Phillips Jr. was missing from his desk. She expected it, but it still pissed her off. The security force for the campaign headquarters had locked down the building, but it had been no good. "Did he enter the building this morning?"

"No, Inspector, Mr. Phillips did not report for work this morning. I did not have an opportunity to explain before you disconnected with me earlier."

She distinctly remembered hanging up on the little troll, so his diplomatic explanation was annoying. "Get me Mr. Phillips's employment record immediately."

"Do you have a warrant?"

Ana moved abruptly between Kyra and her target. "Your full name, sir?"

He straightened his jacket and then cleared his throat. "Frederick Justice O'Malley. My friends call me Justice."

"I am going to remind you that failing to render any and all assistance to an officer of the law is a violation of city ordinance 395a and is punishable with sixty days' confinement. Employment records are not protected by the Privacy Act of 2023." She pulled out her p-pc and began inputting data.

"I will not be bullied."

"I am an officer of the law. It is not my job to bully the citizens of New Orleans into fulfilling their duties. You will go to your office and wait for transport to Police Plaza." Ana dropped her gaze to her p-pc and fought a grimace. She could hear every single breath her partner was taking. "Now."

"The mayor will hear about this," he seethed through clenched teeth. Turning abruptly, Justice O'Malley left the room.

Ana looked back to her p-pc. "Raymond DeChamp."

"Yes, Constable." Raymond DeChamp was dressed in a fine linen suit that showed off all he had to offer in splendid pale yellow detail. He had his own p-pc out already. "If you'll give me your code, I'll begin immediate transfer of the employment records for the campaign."

Ana rattled off her number and eyed him. "No protest?"

"You've demonstrated your determination. There is no need for me to be detained for records that matter little to me personally." He grinned then. "I've also sent you my personal file, in case you have an interest later."

She shot him a look and turned to Kyra. "We've got what we need."

"Fine." Kyra glared at Raymond in passing and jerked her head. "Let's go."

"The last known address is crap." Ana hazarded a glance in Kyra's direction as she buckled herself into the passenger seat. "The press would have been bad if you'd pounded on him."

"As if I fucking care what the press says about me." Kyra shoved the vehicle into drive and fumed as she started out into traffic. "You might want to run a background check on DeChamp before you take him up on his obvious offer."

"I know his type. I already have dick on the side, so his offer really wasn't all that appealing," Ana responded. "You need to charge the vehicle at our next stop. My records indicate that you haven't charged the main batteries or the backup in a week."

"Fine; find an open public charging station near Police Plaza and book us a time."

"You're going to interrogate O'Malley," Ana stated.

"He told me no."

"When do I get to drive this big, shiny dick of yours?" She motioned toward the dash of the black ATV transport and sighed.

Kyra shot her a look. "I thought you didn't want to be my chauffeur?"

"Bite me, respectfully."

Frederick Justice O'Malley was indignant and intent on making sure everyone in Police Plaza knew about it. He'd been detained unlawfully, in his estimation, and would have his revenge. By the time Kyra arrived, O'Malley had managed to get the district attorney's attention. So Kyra didn't get to jump on him immediately.

She was in an observation room when Ana found her. O'Malley was busy moaning and crying to the deputy mayor and the very silent district attorney. "You might get chewed on a little for detaining him."

Ana shrugged. "He broke the law, and he knows it. Employment records do not fall under second-level privacy and do not require a warrant. He was just trying to demonstrate to his employees that he was in charge."

Kyra grinned. "Might have been better to just let me put my foot in his face."

The deputy mayor and district attorney left the interrogation room, and the door to the observation deck immediately opened. Her commander entered the room with them.

"I want her reprimanded and removed from duty!" Deller pointed at Ana. "She unlawfully detained Mr. O'Malley."

Kyra looked at O'Malley. "Funny, for a man who's been unlawfully detained, he looks rather nervous. Wonder what I'll find if I have his residence searched."

"You'll release him immediately."

Kyra's gaze settled on Deller. It was interesting to see a man so entrenched in the Moral Majority, a political party dedicated to eradicating homosexuality and a score of other behaviors they judged to be immoral, defend a known homosexual man. She supposed he was there in an attempt to thwart her.

"No. He will not be released immediately. He has been duly charged with a crime. He will be questioned. He will be processed, and he will be confined the appropriate amount of time for purposefully refusing to assist the police in a murder investigation."

"You don't have the right!"

"Actually, you're wrong." Commander Baker glanced at Kyra as if to gauge her determination. "The inspector is perfectly within her rights, and his detainment was lawful. There is no reason for you to be here."

"Mr. O'Malley requested that the district attorney and I be present during this farce."

Kyra looked then to the district attorney. Jessica Ford was a unique and fascinating woman, and a total politician. "Ms. Ford, you can trust that I will be thorough and fair in my treatment of Mr. O'Malley."

"This man that you've found working for the mayor's campaign ... he's the killer?"

"The individual is wanted for questioning," Kyra stated carefully. "He's known to have impersonated at least three dead children. I'd very much like to know what he has done and why he's chosen to live with false names. He worked at Valteau's and Still Waters and knew all three victims."

"You believe he's the killer."

"He is my only suspect at this point." She looked back at O'Malley. "Justice O'Malley tried to protect him, and I want to know why."

"Very well." Jessica nodded. "I'd like to remain and listen to the questioning, if you don't mind."

"Not at all." Kyra turned to Ana. "Go in and set up the recording equipment and read him his rights." She was silent until Ana had closed the door, then she turned to Deller. "You don't like me, and that's fine." She raised her hand when he started to speak. "Frankly, I outgrew popularity contests when I was nineteen. I don't need your trust, your affection, or even your respect. You want to lash out at me, fine, but you keep it on me. You mess with the cops under my command, and you'll pay for it."

"How dare you threaten me?"

"It wasn't a threat." Kyra shrugged out of her jacket and stretched her arms over her head as she watched Ana and O'Malley. She flipped on the intercom and inclined her head as Ana patiently read him his rights. "Now, unless anyone has any objection, I'd like to go in there and do my job."

"Go ahead, Inspector." District Attorney Ford straightened when the deputy mayor looked at her. "Mr. Deller, you'll have to leave. Mr. O'Malley didn't grant you permission to stay if he was interrogated."

Kyra left the politicians to their wrangling. As she entered the interrogation room, O'Malley leaped to his feet. "I would suggest that you sit back down, or I'll be forced to place you in restraints."

"I've done nothing wrong."

"You refused to give information to an officer of the law, information that is not protected by the privacy act."

"It is an employer's right to refuse to give such information."

"Only in situations of extreme circumstance, and you are well aware of that." Kyra sat down while Ana moved to stand by the door. She engaged the recorder on her p-pc and met his gaze. "Please state your full name and place of employment for the record."

"My name is Frederick Justice O'Malley. I am the campaign manager for the re-election of the mayor of New Orleans."

Kyra nodded. "Tell me what you know about Robert Phillips."

"Nothing."

"You realize that you are being monitored. The truth monitors placed on your body during booking are in full working order. I can assure you that if you are lying, I will know. Your physical responses during questioning will be scrutinized, and if it's discovered that you've lied, you'll be charged accordingly." Kyra sat back in her chair and watched him. She hadn't told him anything he didn't know. "His entire employment record is a work of fiction. You can't tell me that you didn't know that. All of the other records in your employment database are thorough, complete. Robert Phillips's was sparse, and a security check hadn't been conducted."

"A mistake."

"You don't make mistakes," Kyra responded.

"Everyone makes mistakes."

"Not you; you're a perfectionist, and the only reason his file isn't complete is because you allowed it to be. You allowed a man with an assumed name to work closely with one of the most powerful men in the city. How close did Robert get to the mayor? Did he speak of him?"

"No. No. Robert had no interest in even meeting the mayor."

"Did he pay close attention to any women who worked with the campaign?"

"Robert had little interest in women."

Kyra looked at Ana, who had taken out her p-pc. At her brief nod, she turned back to O'Malley. "Are you involved with Mr. Phillips?"

"He is a valued employee with insightful observations and a stunning talent with images. He did a great deal of the artwork on the campaign, as well. There were graphic artists on the team who resented him at first, but when he showed them what he could do, they all agreed that his work was the best they'd ever seen."

"Are you sexually involved with the man pretending to be Robert Phillips?"

"No."

"No?"

"No. Look, we had a few dinners and I had hopes. He's an attractive man, and he showed interest in me. I'm not immune to such things."

"Did he show interest in you after you brought his incomplete file to his attention?"

O'Malley jerked as if she'd struck him, and his back went rigid. "As a matter of fact, no. I noticed his file was incomplete sometime later."

"Your attention to detail is well known."

"Yes." He sucked in air and cleared his throat. "I'm not a fool."

"No. I don't imagine that you are." Kyra looked over his face and tapped the table in front of her. "Did he ever engage in any intimacies with you that would lead you to believe he was considering having sex with you?"

"No. Yes." He blushed. "Robert professed to me that he'd never been involved with a man but was curious." O'Malley shrugged. "He wouldn't have been the first man that I had encountered with such a curiosity."

"No, I imagine not. You're a powerful man in the city, you have the mayor's trust, and you're running his campaign for re-election for the third time."

"Yes."

Kyra picked up her p-pc and called up a picture of Samuel. "When I met him, he was using the name Samuel Killian. Is this Robert?"

He was silent for a moment before clearing his throat. "Yes, though I wouldn't have recognized him if I'd passed him on the street." He held out one finger and traced the line of Samuel's jaw on the screen. "This is a much better look for him." Hesitantly, he pulled out a mini-p-pc, and after a few seconds of tinkering presented Kyra with the screen. "This is how he always looked when I saw him."

Instead of the long black hair, his hair was blond and cut short. She looked at Ana and then stood. "If you'll give your statement to the constable, leaving out nothing and presenting her with any information or other pictures you've retained of Robert, you will be released."

"Yes, Inspector." He cleared his throat. "I'm not someone who is so easily led. I don't normally think with my dick."

"We all make mistakes." She started to stand, but then changed her mind. "Listen to me, Justice. You might be harboring some anger about how my partner and I dragged you in here and embarrassed you in front of the people you work with. It might occur to you to think that I'm after this man you know as Robert for some other reason than the justice you are named for."

"What are you trying to say?"

"If he contacts or tries to meet you, don't give in to his demands or requests, no matter how reasonable his arguments may be. It is my belief that he is dangerous to anyone that knows him."

Justice was silent for a moment and then sighed. "And if you're wrong?"

"If he isn't the killer I'm searching for ... then you need to remember that he has at the very least impersonated three dead children. If he had nothing to hide, he wouldn't hide behind fake names."

"Yeah. Yeah." He rubbed his face. "I'll let you know if he contacts me."

* * * * *

"I want every female employee on the mayor's re-election campaign interviewed. We've got three missing tattoos, and one of them is going to be there." Kyra added a picture of Robert to the pictures she had of Samuel Killian and Aaron Belton.

"You needn't look far."

Kyra turned and watched the district attorney and her commander walk into the room. "Ms. Ford."

Jessica shrugged out of her jacket. "To be truthful, I wasn't going to reveal this." She unbuttoned her blouse and pulled it off her left shoulder. The fanciful little rainbow flowed from the top of her left breast almost to her collarbone. "I've been working closely with the mayor's campaign. After all, his support secured me my position and will continue do so as long as he's in place."

Kyra's mouth tightened. "Clear this room."

The six men and women who had been in the briefing room jumped up and fought each other to get out of the room. When only the DA and the commander remained, Kyra walked to the murder board where her victims' pictures hung.

"Suppose you considered this a matter of privacy."

"Something like that."

"You realize that a public recognition that you had one of the missing tattoos could help the other women come forward."

"Perhaps." She refastened her blouse and considered her next words. "I was drunk and being stupid with a friend. I'd managed to go an entire evening without being recognized."

"Deller?"

"Has no clue." Jessica snorted and shook her head. "He would likely keel over from the pure shock of it. Everyone is very aware of his stance on homosexuality."

"Yes, I was surprised to see him here with O'Malley."

"He likes to play the compassionate conservative for the mayor."

Kyra shook her head. "I don't buy that our guy would pick you out as a victim."

"He couldn't have known who I was that night."

"Once the choice was made ..." Kyra sighed. "Fuck."

"Do you think he'll try for me?"

"Not at the moment, which will make his next victim one of the ones we don't know." Kyra frowned. "How the hell did he know to pick women who lived here? Mardi Gras fills up with people from all over the freaking planet ... there were even three ships from the moon colony that week, full of people with nothing better to do than get drunk and screw in the streets."

"Inspector." Jessica clicked her tongue. "The city of New Orleans doesn't encourage the citizens to screw in the streets."

"You paid cash."

"Yes."

Kyra rubbed the back of her neck. "Fine, write out your statement, and forward it to me and my partner. I'll make every effort not to make this an issue with the press."

"That's acceptable."

"By the way, he dubbed you Bitch 5." She watched the color drain from the lawyer's face and nodded. "You'll get a protection detail assigned. I would suggest that you do nothing to hamper their ability to protect you."

Desi Marcos was wearing a pair of goggles that had more functions than her vibrator, and she had to admit they were almost as exciting. She pulled them off, and the spectrum of colors disappeared. "Inspector."

"Make my day, Dr. Marcos."

"O'Malley keeps a spotless apartment. I did find some hair in the bathroom; I'll need a DNA sample from him so that I can eliminate him from my samples. From his statement, we know that the man he knew as Robert was in here a handful of times."

"The bed?"

"If there has been activity in it, the evidence has been cleared. My personal opinion is that O'Malley would have no reason to lie about any sexual contact. It isn't like he's in the closet or anything."

"Yeah." Kyra looked around the living room of the apartment and frowned. "How can anyone be this neat?"

"It's sort of sick," Desi agreed. "He doesn't even have leftovers in his fridge. I'll have the CSU team packed and ready to go back to the lab soon."

"Did you get the offer from the commander?"

Desi paused. "Head of Forensics for Major Crimes?"

"Yeah, that one."

"I told him I'd think about it."

"Good." Kyra turned to Ana as Desi went back to her team. "Okay, tell me what you think of Justice O'Malley."

Ana paused and seemed to consider what to say. "He's a precise man who likes things to be neat and orderly. He is unashamed of his lifestyle and makes no excuses for it. Justice O'Malley isn't the sort of man to knowingly involve himself with a criminal. He'll have nothing more to do with the man he knew as Robert."

Kyra nodded. "I agree. Anything else?"

"Yes." Ana paused briefly. "He was more emotionally involved with Robert than he'd realized. When he was faced with Robert's obvious betrayal, he realized how invested he had been in the relationship. He found it unsettling."

“Our suspect has a way of ingratiating himself with people around him. When I first met Samuel Killian, I actually felt pity for his grief. I really believed he loved Donna LaRoux.”

“He may have, in his own sick little way.”

“No, if he’d loved her ... the crime would have been so much more passionate.”

“Like Stacey Valteau?”

Kyra turned and looked at her. “Yes, exactly like Stacey.”

Chapter Thirteen

Inspector,

Your lack of attention to my work has been frustrating.

You don't understand how important I am.

Your arrogance will not go unpunished.

The Waterman

Kyra read the note with dread and fury pooling in her stomach. Her first impulse was to call everyone that she loved and ensure that they were alive and well. Since giving in to such an impulse would have been a weakness, she handed her p-pc to Desi Marcos and turned her back on the people in the room. The killer was baiting her, and it was important that she not allow herself to dwell on it. The note was no more personal or intimate than the others.

Detectives Brant and Trane sat at the table along with Detective Ryan Jennings, who had come from Police Plaza to join her task force. She knew why he was there, and for the moment, she didn't resent it. His father had been a cop for twenty-seven years and had retired as the commander of District 1. His son hadn't been given a free ride, but he did get his choice of assignments. He'd asked to join the team that would catch a serial killer, because it would be exciting.

"He's shifted his focus," Desi said as she began the process of tracing the transmission.

"Yes."

“It’s no longer about his power but about your indifference.” Desi frowned and sighed. “He used a p-pc registered in Justice O’Malley’s name. Not really a surprise.”

“So how will he punish us for not getting on television and proclaiming his brilliance and our fear?”

“The wait won’t be long,” Kyra mused. “Not long at all.”

“CSU came back with the data on Stacey Valteau’s personal compu-station. There were a few emails that seemed to be intimate, but they came from a young woman living in the New York Dome. She and Stacey attended a youth camp in Florida about two years ago and remained close friends after they returned home.” Desi paused as she continued to look over the report on her p-pc. “Nothing from any of the known aliases of the suspect.”

* * * * *

It was the scoop of a lifetime. Jeff Marks watched the recording several times in awe; the ceremony of it was astounding, the positioning of the body shocking and horrific. He knew he’d never get that past the censors. He’d have to blur the body parts, of course, maybe then ... Christ, it was so good. How had he gotten so fortunate?

* * * * *

She made me do it. My vision should have been hers. Why didn’t she believe in me? All I needed was a few more days. Just a few more, and she could have continued on with her life. Did you see how she made me treat her? It wasn’t supposed to be her! It just wasn’t time. It’s all her fault, I swear. I know you wanted it to be different. I’ve disappointed you again. Failed again. I promised you I’d never do that, didn’t I? So long ago, I promised that I would never fail you again.

I’ve always done what needed to be done to serve the mission. I killed my friends to protect it, didn’t I? I lured all three of them from home and killed them because I’d been so foolish to contact Jason. I was lonely! I was so lonely until he found and saved me. If I’d just waited, they could have lived.

I know I know. I’ve helped them live in the only way I could. I tried to make up for what I did. It won’t ever be enough, not for them. But it will be for you. I’ve laid out the rest of my plans ... you will be so pleased with what I have in mind. So pleased.

Ana paused at the doorway of the conference room and stared at the news feed on the vid-panel for several moments before she moved closer and cleared her throat. “Panel, volume four.”

“Again, this exclusive footage obtained from an anonymous source.” Jeff Marks looked appropriately serious and concerned as he spoke. “The footage, of course, is shocking, and I caution parents about allowing their young children to view the following images. At this

point, we are uncertain as to who made this recording ...” His face was gone, replaced by a close-up of Casey Mills’s face. Then the camera drew away from her face and over the position of a body that was so familiar, for a moment Ana lost the ability to move.

“Kyra!”

Kyra reached out for Ana as soon as she could, steadying her, and shouting that the vid-panel be turned off. “Detective Brant, I want that bastard in my custody within the next twenty minutes.” She shoved Ana into a chair. “Constable Salanti, look at my face.”

Ana, pale and shaking, met Kyra’s gaze and flinched. “Yes, Inspector.”

“You are *not* going to cry, and you are *not* going to lose it. Do you understand me?”

“Yes. Yes.” She nodded abruptly.

“You’re going to be mad.” Kyra gripped her chin roughly. “Pissed. Get that way right now.”

“I’m going to need my crown,” Ana whispered.

Kyra almost laughed. “Get up, and get me an interrogation room.” She backed off, and Ana scurried away. The door closed on Ana’s retreating back, and Kyra turned on the two cops still in the room. “He killed a cop and sent a fucking recording of it to the press.”

“A cop.” Ryan Jennings looked toward the screen.

“A beat cop, Ana’s former partner. She was reassigned to Anti-Crime. Find out where she’s supposed to be.”

“Look, you can’t do this to me.”

Kyra sat down in front of Jeff Marks and very calmly laid her p-pc down in front of her. “Did you talk to him?”

“To who?”

“The man who sent you the recording of a dead cop.”

Jeff paled and swallowed visibly. “A cop? Look, it just came to me on mini-disk about an hour before the afternoon news. I didn’t know who it was. I ran with it. I thought it might be a copy of a police scene report.”

“Since you have gotten copies of scene reports illegally in the past, you are aware that they are always marked with time, date, and case number. The footage you received and that you put on the afternoon news wasn’t dated and was obviously not official police footage. You knew what you had. You knew you had a recording of a fresh murder scene, and *you* didn’t care.” Kyra watched him squirm in the chair.

“Today, you notified every loved one Constable Casey Mills had that she was dead. They saw her lying dead in that filthy alleyway, and it is entirely your fault. Every news station in the country will pick up that footage, and just in case there is someone that knew

Constable Casey Mills and didn't see your disgusting display, they can tune in to the station of their choice to see that crap that you thought was news. How does it feel to be chosen by a psycho? He considers you his voice, his outlet to the world."

"You can't be serious." Jeff paled further, his hands clenched into fists.

"He'll watch you. You should be careful not to disappoint him." Kyra stood.

"You have to protect me."

"I have to go find a dead cop."

They found her two blocks from her apartment. The Anti-Crime unit she'd been assigned to skirted the edge of the scene, keeping reporters and onlookers away. Senior Inspector Liz Givens was off to Kyra's left, silent and watchful. Kyra hadn't made any effort to remove her, and wouldn't as long as she didn't interfere.

"Is she married?"

Ana shook her head. "No. Had a live-in, but they broke up. Her mom lives in New York." She firmed up her mouth as she watched Kyra work over the body. She'd insisted on coming to the scene once it had been located and she regretted it. "She didn't have any tattoos."

He'd taken a small patch of skin shaped like a badge over her heart. Her real badge had been found under her body.

"Get on your comm-u and find out why Parker isn't here." Kyra straightened and looked at Liz Givens. "If you want on the task force, I won't fight it."

"She was good. When you requested that I take her on, I was surprised." Liz shrugged. "You don't make a habit of recommending someone. You did, so I took her seriously." She looked away from the body. "I want in. I have a strong unit; we can do a lot of the street work."

"Yeah." Kyra stood. "Give me two hours, then meet me back at the station."

Liz's gaze went to Ana, who had walked quickly away from the body, her back rigid. "Is your partner going to hold?"

"She will." Kyra looked down to Casey Mills and wondered if she would. "She wasn't stupid, and she wasn't weak."

"No, she never would have gone with a stranger. I'd circulated your perp's pictures through my unit this morning; she wouldn't have gone with him." Liz sighed. "Mills was a solid cop with decent instincts."

She would have if she'd known him, Kyra thought. Had Casey Mills gone home to a man she thought she could trust? Had she jokingly told him how much he resembled the pictures she'd viewed that morning of a suspected serial killer? Maybe she'd never know

what happened, though she would have preferred to know if Casey had been a bad cop or not.

Ana bent from the waist and leaned against Kyra's vehicle. She had never thrown up on a scene, and for the love of all that was holy, she never would. The closer she'd gotten to Casey's body, the more hurt she'd become. Hurt, furious, and so cold. She rubbed her arms and closed her eyes.

"Constable?"

She jerked up, then slumped a little when she saw Dr. Parker. "The inspector is looking for you."

"Yes." Jeffrey nodded and touched Ana's shoulder. "You think she won't respect you if you show weakness?"

"I don't know," she whispered. "I don't think I can risk it."

"Constable Mills was your friend."

"Yes."

"Mourn her, Ana. I know you won't do it now, but give in to it soon, or you'll be no good to Kyra and no good to yourself."

* * * * *

Kyra finished taping her knuckles and tightened her hands into fists. She had to get it out, get it out before it got someone killed. Barefoot, she faced off with a punching bag and swung hard. Sweat poured and fury flowed with each motion of her body. The bag swung out against her, and she responded instantly. But it wasn't abating; she pounded on the bag until her arms ached with it. The fury lingered. She'd stood over a dead cop and, though she would never admit it, had been punished for not taking the killer's needs seriously.

He wanted attention; she knew that. He wanted *her* attention. He'd damn well get it. Leaving the abused bag swinging, she went into the locker room and stripped out of the sweats and sports bra she'd put on. The other women in the locker room were quiet -- they always were when they knew she was in there -- but this was even different from the usual. Cops died in the line of duty. It was something they all accepted. But to be taken like Casey Mills had been just wasn't considered.

She showered quickly and dressed in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt with the NOPD logo on it. Kyra had nothing to say to the other women, nothing that would comfort them. She just hoped that they found that comfort somewhere. The rest of the station was loud and chaotic; at least that was normal. The Major Crimes unit was like a tomb, everyone working quietly and no one getting a damn thing done.

The moment she entered, the six detectives stood and followed along after her. The Anti-Crime unit of four men and three women already sat in the conference room, and

Casey Mills's photo had been added to the victim board. Ana was the last to enter, and she looked as solid as ever. Kyra knew it was a show, but she was willing to let her partner have it. She had to hold up, because it was what cops did.

The conference room was no bigger than the first room they'd started using for the task force, but it was more private. She noticed that Ana had already seen that the murder board and the suspect board had been moved into the room. The images of the suspected killer and his victims were prominently displayed. It was a constant reminder of what they were doing and why they were doing it.

"Inspector Givens." Kyra sat down. "Constable Mills's last assignment?"

"We had an interdistrict assignment with all four districts in the city. It was a big bust; she blended right in with the team. Constable Mills worked a drug buy with Sergeant Ryan." She glanced at the officer in question. "It was a successful bust, and after the paperwork was done I sent everyone home. That was about ten hours before the tape aired on Channel 4." Liz took a deep draw from her coffee cup. "She was due to report for work at four o'clock this afternoon."

"The door-to-door?"

Liz shook her head. "Nothing. A woman living across the street from the alley vaguely remembers a dark van of unknown make and model leaving the alleyway sometime in the early morning, but she didn't pay it much attention; figured it was a delivery."

"Except that there are no businesses connected to that alley." Ana called up a neighborhood map and highlighted the alleyway. "If there are deliveries down that alley, it's not business. There is only one building on the alleyway that actually has a door that opens to it, and that's the Sweet Springs apartment complex." She highlighted that building. "This is the first time he's chosen an alley in a predominantly residential neighborhood."

"Except for the highway dumping."

Ana shook her head, concentrating. "Stacey Valteau had her tattoo removed; she was no longer worthy of being considered his victim. He wanted to distance himself from her body. We are also of the belief that he had a vested interest in her."

"Yes," Kyra murmured. "We also know that the constable didn't have a tattoo. He took skin, then dumped her according to his ritual. She's a message to me."

"To us," Ana corrected. "He singled you out, but he's taunting us all. The press had your picture all over the place when you took that hit for the mayor. He was probably giddy when he realized you'd been assigned to him. He thinks you're important and believes that he's important as a result."

"You'll make me think I'm not special." That got a hesitant smile, and she watched Ana relax. "You are right, of course; he didn't care who worked his case until he realized it would be me. My unfortunate habit of stepping into bullets for twits has earned me a spotlight in

the media. A spotlight he expected me to use. He, like a few other people in this city, considers me something of a media whore.”

“Well, you’d best put on your flashiest hooker boots.” Liz leaned back in her chair. “You know you’ll have to respond to this son of a bitch.”

“Maybe you could wear the pants.” Ana hid her grin behind her coffee.

Kyra stood. “Yeah, maybe. I knew I should have gotten the vest, too.” She focused on Desi, who had remained silent. She knew what was coming, but asked because, deep down, they were all expecting it. “Tell me, Dr. Marcos.”

“Constable Mills accessed all of the files for all three cases; before she left the station yesterday, she downloaded all of the data to her p-pc.”

“That’s bullshit.”

Kyra held out her hand and put it on Ana’s arm when she started to stand. “He was using Constable Mills to gather information. I don’t believe she was feeding him.”

“Casey was a smart cop. She wouldn’t have been involved with someone who expressed that sort of interest in her work.”

“He killed her. That’s enough for me at the moment.” She cleared her throat. “Okay, people, we’ve got the details to work. Liz, I can trust you’ll handle Casey’s family?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Ana, did you want to attend the vid-conference with Casey’s mother?”

Ana straightened visibly. “I’m with you.”

They all knew where Kyra was headed. She almost grimaced at the defiant way Ana met her stare. Christ, had she ever been that obvious and scared?

“Fine. I’ll meet you in my transport in ten minutes. I’d like a moment with Inspector Givens. Clear the room.”

Kyra watched Liz sit back down as the room rapidly emptied of bodies. “You have a strong team. I thought that you’d be a good influence on Mills. She had good procedures but sometimes her emotions overran her training.”

“Yeah.” Liz nodded.

“You and I both know if she’d succeeded in bringing Aaron Belton in, it would have made her career golden. That sort of takedown ...” Kyra waved her hand around the room and then looked at Casey’s picture. “I don’t think she was feeding him on purpose, and when she realized who he was, it must have been a blow to her self-esteem. Cops are taught to trust their instincts ...”

“As far as I’m concerned, she died in the line of duty. Our speculation about her relationship with the killer is just that -- speculation. It won’t go in any report I write or sign off on.”

Kyra nodded. “Good.”

Kyra shoved her hands into her pockets and stared at Casey Mills's insides with what she hoped was a face devoid of emotion. "Well?"

"She's got a multitude of fractures and breaks," Jeffrey began. "And he raped her."

Her hands curled into fists, and her gaze dropped to the floor. Ana was barely breathing beside her. "For the love of God, Ana, go outside and wait."

Ana turned immediately and left the room.

"You're going to have to give her a few hours to adjust, or she'll splinter."

"It's coming." Kyra looked back to the body. "Drowning?"

"Yes."

"The rape?"

"Garden variety -- vaginal penetration only, and no fluids. I'm not sure if he used his penis."

Kyra's gaze narrowed. "The prick probably can't even get it up."

"Good. Good. Use all of that controlled fury when you talk to the press. He'll turn himself in."

"I'm in no mood for crap."

"No, but your partner isn't the only one on the edge."

"We stood over a dead cop, Jeffrey. If that doesn't make you furious, you aren't the man I think you are."

"Actually, Kyra, standing over a dead cop horrifies me. A man who would hunt and murder a cop has no fear of punishment, no fear of the hell he's brought down on himself. He just doesn't care. He doesn't care how angry you are, how angry every cop in the city is. A man that would kill a cop, knowing how cops react to the murder of their own, will kill at will and will kill until he's captured."

"He will care." Kyra looked down to Casey Mills's body and shook her head. "I was going to leave her in Anti-Crime for a few years and then offer her a spot in Major Crimes. I figured it would toughen her up, make her a good murder cop."

"It would have."

"She's dead."

"He chose her because she was close but not close enough. Had he really wanted to put it to you, you would have a dead partner on this table."

"Don't you think I know that?" Kyra demanded roughly. "Do you think I don't look at Ana and imagine that it was her in that fucking alleyway?" She took a calming breath. "I've forwarded you the list of the task force; it got expanded. Please send the report to all of them."

"Yeah." Parker waved her off.

“Sorry.”

“Just catch him.”

Kyra nodded and turned on her heel. She found Ana in Jeffrey’s office, her face buried in her hands. Kyra sat down beside her and cleared her throat. “When I made detective, I was assigned a new partner. He was brash and so full of himself.” Ana let her hands drop from her face. “One night we were on our way back to the station from a particularly horrible domestic disturbance, and we stopped in at a store to get some coffee. There was some asshole in there with a pipe bomb -- robbing the store. Stephen rushed him. They both died in the blast.”

“I know. You hung in there, and you ran the scene. I read the file.”

“Yeah, but the file is incomplete. I had a meltdown right there. The owner of the store had to pull me into his office and hold me while I cried like a baby. By the time the other cops got there, I was back in control and I worked that scene like I didn’t even know Stephen, like I hadn’t been fucking him for eight months.”

Ana’s mouth dropped open. “You don’t date cops.”

“I don’t date cops because of Stephen.”

“She was a good person. Casey had this huge chip on her shoulder, I guess, because her dad went down in the line of duty but there was some talk that he was dirty.”

“He probably was dirty. The department had a lot of crap to overcome. One of the reasons the city police force was reorganized in 2142 was because of the corrupt crap going on. The government wasn’t new, but it took a long time after the third civil war to settle the population and rebuild the foundations of civilization. Once city and state governments were in place, a lot of the other stuff had been allowed to slide. Empire building and corruption followed.” Kyra leaned back, looked around the small, overfurnished office, and wondered if her rambling was due to nervousness or helplessness. She really had no clue how to help her partner get past her grief. “You trusted her.”

“She wasn’t a bad cop.” Ana sat up in the chair and shook back her hair. “That son of a bitch used her because he thought we’d think she was.”

“Yeah.”

“Casey was saving up to take one of those silly cruises to the moon.” She sniffed and cleared her throat.

“The moon is ugly.”

“Yeah, but the getting there is supposed to be pretty damn cool.”

Kyra stood and glanced at her comm-u. “Let’s get some food.”

“Sit down?”

“No, we’ll get some sandwiches. I want back to get back to the station so I can prepare for my next press conference.”

“Yeah.” Ana grimaced as she held up her p-pc. “The killer has started emailing the media.”

The first thing she noticed was that Jeff Marks had been replaced. The young woman on hand from Channel 4 was a new face, and Kyra knew why they’d sent her. She was pretty, and she looked innocent.

“Good afternoon.” She braced herself on the podium as she moved her gaze around the room. “As many of you are aware, Constable Casey Mills was murdered last night. Constable Mills was assigned to the Anti-Crime unit of District 4 and performed her duties with goodwill and courage. She will be sorely missed by the department and by her fellow officers.” They weren’t raising their hands. She wondered if they could see how close she was to losing her ever-loving mind. “Her killer, as you might have guessed, is the same man that killed Donna LaRoux, Janie Monroe, and Stacy Valteau. The NOPD has requested a profile from the FBI, and we are pursuing any and all leads. Questions?”

One hand went up hesitantly. “Gary Nelson, *New Orleans Times*.” When she nodded, he stood and looked down at his notes. “As you may know, the killer has sent the senior editor of my news-vid several letters.”

“Yes, those letters have been forwarded to me.”

“He’s calling himself the ‘Waterman.’ Is there some significance for the name?”

“No, but like serial killers in the past, he’s endeavoring to make himself famous.”

“Then you admit you are dealing with a serial killer?”

“At this point, Gary, it would be ridiculous to deny it. We are looking for a young man between twenty and thirty. In the press kits that have been prepared for you, you’ll be given several artist renderings based on witness descriptions and a few photos. I would ask any citizen who sees this individual to call the nearest police district. He is to be considered armed and extremely dangerous.”

The young woman from Channel 4 raised her hand, and Kyra went to her without hesitating. She would make the station pay for what they’d done, but she wouldn’t punish a stranger. “Yes, Channel 4.”

“Good afternoon, Inspector. Joanna Dawson, Channel 4. Is your task force prepared to deal with a serial killer?”

“Every cop on the force in New Orleans is working to help bring this individual to justice. I have no doubts that we will prevail.”

“Do you think he is evil?”

“I think he is a small and ineffectual man who preys on women.”

“The tattoos?”

She paused and considered her words. “We believe the killer is the tattoo artist and that he marked his victims for slaughter during the last Mardi Gras. I would ask that you all display the tattoos of the fairy and the unicorn.”

“Who had the rainbow?”

“That information is confidential, but be assured that she is under our protection and unavailable to the killer.”

“One more question.”

“Yes.”

“Why did he kill a cop?”

“As his letters indicate, he felt he wasn’t getting enough attention.”

* * * * *

She’s angry with me, too. Kyra knows that I failed you, that I didn’t follow the plans I made. She’s angry that I disappointed you. Angry with me. I don’t deserve her anger; she isn’t worthy of being angry with me. She isn’t worthy, yet.

I needed more information from the cop, but she became a risk. She saw too much, was beginning to suspect. How much longer would I have been expected to endure her suspicions? She was supposed to love me!

Kyra’s close now. Can you see her? Are you pleased with the vessel I’ve chosen? I knew you would be. She’s so strong and brave.

Chapter Fourteen

Lloyd Deller was in a full-blown conniption fit when Kyra entered her commander's office. Both men stopped yelling when they saw her. She took the seat her commander motioned her to and crossed her legs at the knee.

"I wasn't aware that the deputy mayor is privy to operational reports in an open investigation."

"Baker, I demand that you rein her in. She had no business giving that press conference, and she violated the agreement we made not even forty-eight hours ago."

"It is the inspector's job to relate information to the public as she sees fit, both to protect the general populace and to facilitate her investigation."

"That's bullshit. She purposefully disobeyed me."

"I don't take orders from you," Kyra responded carefully. She wasn't going to let Deller reduce her to a foaming-at-the-mouth, raving bitch. She held up her hand when her commander started to speak. "Mr. Deller, you are angry with me because you feel that I've undermined the mayor and his position that the city is perfectly safe. That's fine; you be angry, because this city is *not* perfectly safe. I stood over a dead cop this morning, which means that any arrangements I might have agreed to in the past no longer apply. I'll do everything I can to catch this son of a bitch, and if you get in my way, I'll crucify you in the press."

"You are accountable for your actions."

"And you are accountable for your inaction. If the mayor would like to have a word with me, tell him to make an appointment."

"You aren't going to be able to hide behind your grandmother this time."

"I don't hide behind my grandmother." She stood. "I'd be careful about speaking of her. She has a habit of showing up when someone does."

Deller's eyes darted around as if he expected Sharon to appear out of thin air. "Do you think you'd be where you are if it weren't for Sharon Moray?"

Kyra flinched. "Don't push me, Deller."

"You are dismissed, Inspector." Ethan stood and glared when Deller started to respond. "I'll expect a transmission of your operational report ASAP."

"My partner has already transmitted it."

Kyra walked to her desk, anger still brewing in her stomach. "Has the profiler reported yet?"

"He's on his way here." Ana put a mini-disk in a plastic case on her desk. "He sent the profile along with a request to be on hand when the killer is captured. The commander approved the request."

Kyra didn't pick up the profile, but instead shoved her p-pc into the desk docking station and began going through her incoming messages. The autopsy report for Casey Mills had come through quickly; since she'd seen how Parker had been with the body, she wasn't surprised.

It wasn't fair that the murder of a cop spurred greater activity out of people than the average citizen, but that was the way it was. She looked at Ana, who was also reading the ME's report. The official logo was visible to Kyra from her desk. She watched as her partner went rigid in her chair and then stood abruptly from her desk.

The office was silent after Ana shut the door. Kyra rubbed the back of her neck and shared a look with Desi. "When she comes back, tell her to take three hours for rest."

"You're going to do the same?"

"Yeah."

Kyra grabbed her p-pc and stood. "Call me if you get anything. I also want the description of the van released to the press. Let's let the people of New Orleans use their inability to respect the privacy of others for a good cause."

* * * * *

Alex was at the bar when she entered. Kyra didn't bother to question why she'd come to Still Waters instead of going home and crawling into her bed. He left the bar and followed her down the short hallway that led to his office. She was silent as he followed her inside. She turned and buried her face in his chest and shuddered when he wrapped his arms around her.

"She was twenty-five years old."

"I know. Channel 4 did a bio on her life and her choice to become a police officer." He guided her to the couch and sat down with her. She curled into him with no prompting. "I guess they're working pretty hard to get back in the good graces of the department."

"They can all fuck off and die."

"Tell me what you need." He ran his fingers through her hair.

"Just this." She closed her eyes. "Don't leave me."

"I won't."

Kyra settled against him and let her head rest on his thigh, sighing as he continued to play with her hair.

Alex was silent as her breathing evened out and she surrendered to sleep. He couldn't imagine when the last time she'd slept was. The door to his office opened a crack, and Marcus stuck his head in.

"Wow." Marcus looked her over and shook his head. "She's going to need some food when she wakes up."

"Yeah." She moved but didn't wake. He doubted she was normally such a deep sleeper. "Find her partner and let her know she's here. I'm going to turn off her comm-u and p-pc."

"She'll kick your ass for that."

"She won't be any good to anyone if she doesn't get some decent sleep." He unbuckled her holster and motioned his brother inside. "Help me out here."

Her gun was gone. The familiar weight was the first thing she missed. She sat bolt upright, her hand searching for it.

"It's on my desk, along with your comm-u and p-pc." He stood from the chair he was sitting in just across from her. "You look better."

Kyra sat up and swung her feet to the floor. "I didn't ask you to take off my gun."

"You didn't say I couldn't, either."

She stood from the couch and shook back her hair as she reached for her weapon. As she strapped it on, she noticed that her comm-u and p-pc had been turned off. She turned them on and offered him a glare. "If I'd known you were going to be so highhanded, I would have gone home."

"You needed the sleep."

"I'm working a very difficult case. I will not tolerate your interference with my job." She flipped the p-pc open and checked her inbox.

"Nothing has happened while you slept."

"That's beside the point, and you damn well know it. I'm just fucking you." She turned, in time to take one step back as he advanced on her. Irritated that she'd backed away from him, Kyra jerked her head at the door. "I thought you didn't get personal in your place."

Alex moved closer still and pressed her against the desk, pinning her by placing his hands on either side of her. "You're *just* fucking me."

"That's what I said," she ground out through clenched teeth.

"Yet you came over here to my place ... to be with me, to sleep. Those aren't the actions of a woman who's *just* fucking me." He let his eyes drift briefly to her mouth before meeting her gaze. "You're irritated with me, fine. But I won't tolerate your demeaning what we're developing here because it scares you."

"I'm not afraid of you." She pushed at his chest and wasn't surprised when he didn't budge.

"No, but you are afraid I might mean something to you."

"Back the fuck off." She glared at him pointedly. "Before I have to hurt you."

Alex lifted his hands from the desk and took a step back from her. "Your partner arrived about forty minutes ago. I imagine if you're nice to her, she might let you participate in her feast." He watched her as she put the devices in their holders on her belt and adjusted her gun again. "You know you're far more naked without your gun than you are without your clothes."

"Oh, really?" She raised an eyebrow and then looked toward the couch. "I did need the sleep."

"Yeah, you did."

"Might be a while before you get me naked again."

"I'm a grown man; I don't need sex on an hourly basis." He walked back to her. Carefully, he straightened the strap of her holster and then met her gaze. "Thank you for trusting me."

"You think I trust you?" she asked with a small smile.

"I know you trust me. You never would have fallen asleep with me otherwise." He leaned against his desk and looked over her face. "Now, back to the sex ..." He stopped when she laughed. "Food first and then filthy talk, if you have time."

"Yeah." She let him guide her from the office. Ana was in the booth they'd used earlier in the week, a table full of food before her. "She really is having a feast."

"She couldn't decide what she wanted." Alex laughed. "I just told the cook to set her up with a variety."

Ana pointed in Alex's direction with a French fry. "I have a crush on him."

"It's okay. I think I do, too." Kyra slid into the booth across from her and snagged a napkin. "Extra fork?"

Ana passed her a set of silverware wrapped in a cloth napkin, and then a plate. "Desi's team is working the city cameras. They're trying to pick up the van on the road during the time that the bodies were dumped. So far, no luck, but it's a good idea."

"Yeah." Kyra looked up at Alex. "Joining us?"

"No." He leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. "I have a few things to take care of."

They both watched him walk away.

"When this is settled, you owe that man a fuckfest on my behalf." Ana speared a shrimp with her fork. "And I mean all the dirty, unsaid stuff people do, too."

"Make me a list." Kyra browsed through her inbox as she dumped a basket of chicken fingers onto her plate. "What else?"

"Parker positively linked Stacey Valteau to the victim pool, based on the DNA evidence on Casey."

"Good. Good." Kyra checked her comm-u and frowned. "I slept five hours?"

"Yeah, it reaffirms my theory that you could be human." Ana flipped through her own notes. "A Marta Jonathan turned herself in to the colony security on the moon just over an hour ago. She has the fairy tattoo. They've put a guard on her, and all incoming transports to the moon are being monitored for our suspect."

"That's a break for his pattern."

"Nope, she worked in New Orleans until about May, when SETI officially announced they'd picked up a radio signal of nonterrestrial origin. Marta Jonathan is a deep-space radar specialist. She's working with SETI and the government on the signal to determine its origin."

"That stuff creeps me out. Move on. No talk about aliens."

Ana nodded. "Okay, so we've got one victim left."

"When he killed Casey, he opened his victim pool up considerably. We can't even begin to assume that the tattoos are the only thing he needs."

"I agree."

Kyra's head jerked up, and she nodded to Inspector Liz Givens when she slid into the booth beside Ana. "Hey."

"Hey." She took the plate and silverware Ana offered. "You women sure know how to eat."

"It's our professional duty to remind the public that we don't live on doughnuts." Ana offered her a basket of shrimp. "You can get the menu if you want."

"No, I'll just graze on what's available." She put her own p-pc on the table and met Kyra's gaze as Ana piled food on her plate. "I've spoken at length with Casey's mother and stepfather. They admit she harbored some resentment that it was rumored her father was a bad cop. However, she'd never exhibited impulsive behavior and wouldn't have attempted to apprehend a suspect on her own."

Kyra nodded her agreement and motioned with a chicken finger for Liz to continue.

"Her ex-boyfriend is a clean-cut lawyer in finance. He liked banging a cop and seemed pretty shaken up about her death." Liz's mouth tightened. "He was one of those fortunate souls who caught it on the news."

"Eat." Kyra pointed at her plate.

"Oh." Liz reached down into her bag and handed Kyra a box. "You got this in the afternoon mail. Dr. Marcos has already had it inspected for prints; nothing exterior."

Kyra took the box and set aside her plate. "Great. I wonder what the bastard has sent me now?"

She sliced open the tape with a knife from her silverware set and opened the box. Accepting the gloves that Ana wordlessly offered across the table, she pulled the secure-foam free from the box and sat back against the booth. She glared at the wax figure with pure distaste. The little gold badge and dark hair that flowed from the head of the Voodoo doll made it clear whom he wanted the doll to represent. "What a fucking cliché."

She tilted and turned it so that Ana and Liz could see it.

"It's a Voodoo doll." Ana's nose wrinkled as she frowned.

"A doll such as this serves little purpose, and it's just a tourist trinket." Kyra set the box down and pushed it away from her a little.

"Then why do it?" Liz took the box and frowned at the doll. "I'd be insulted if I were you -- you have a much better figure." She inclined her head. "Do you think the stickpin in the genital area represents his belief that you have a penis, or is he threatening you?"

"It's a threat." All three women jerked and looked at Alex, who had come to stand beside Kyra. "Close the box."

Kyra took the box and closed it carefully. She met Alex's gaze and noticed the tension there. The doll had upset him. "It's just a game for him."

"Take that to Clara." He clenched his jaw and looked briefly at the box.

"I will."

He touched her hair. "You take this man out before he harms what's mine."

She watched him walk away and fought a smile. "I just love an arrogant man."

"Nice ass, too." Liz shook her head. "I thought you were gay."

"Fuck you," Kyra snapped.

"Yeah, I was actually looking forward to trying."

Ana sputtered, and Kyra started laughing. "Thank you, Inspector. I haven't been complimented like that in ages." She stood. "Come along, ladies. We'll visit the Voodoo queen, and then we are going to hunt down the Belton family."

Clara was fixing the scarecrow's hat when Kyra came to a stop in the driveway. "She's going to be pissy."

"Isn't she always?" Liz asked.

"Yeah, pretty much."

Clara turned and glared at them. "Inspector Moray, are you creating some sort of pack of bitch cops?"

"Task force for a serial killer." Kyra pulled off her sunshields as she exited the car. "Did Alex call you?"

"Yes." Clara pursed her lips. "It's the only damn reason that I'm willing to receive you again. I told you I didn't want to be involved with this case further. We'll have this meeting outside."

Kyra pulled the box out of her bag and handed it to her. "He sent it in the same method he sent the *govi*."

Clara opened the box. "Alex was displeased with this."

"Yes."

"More for the threat it represents than the actual doll. As you know, practitioners of Voodoo rarely use dolls like this. I know none that use them in practice today. It was a way that established religions used to create fear of Voodoo." She stared at the doll for a moment. "After you've had the doll inspected by your lab, remove the pin."

"It means nothing." Kyra responded.

"Remove the pin." Clara repeated. She handed the box back to her. "I saw the news report."

"And?"

"He's killing cops, female cops. He feels threatened by you. You, specifically. If you make yourself available, he will try to take you."

"Did you know Jake Belton?"

"Yes. His wife was a very active part of the Voodoo community. The entire family died in a house fire." Clara turned back to the scarecrow and began to straighten its shirt. "He was a cruel man, and was on the way to raising a son who would be just like him."

"We think that Jake and Aaron might have survived the fire."

"Then you are after Aaron as the killer." Clara nodded.

"Yes."

"He was a cruel and thoughtless child. His mother, Nera, often sought my counsel on Aaron. She believed her husband encouraged Aaron to be violent."

"Jake and Nera had marital problems?" Kyra asked.

"Jake joined one of those antigovernment movements. He would take Aaron to the meetings. Jake Belton hated women. Frankly, I was surprised when he and Nera married. I thought she had better sense."

"Do you know which movement Jake joined?"

“Yes.” Clara’s mouth twisted in distaste. “The New South Militia.”

“Okay.” Ana fastened her harness and pulled down a docking station in the back of the vehicle so she could work. “Tell me about the scarecrow.”

“Are you sure?”

“I couldn’t be more freaked out,” she promised solemnly.

“She dresses it in her dead son’s clothes.” Kyra put the transport in gear and glanced in her rearview mirror. “Her son was declared dead fifteen years ago. Despite a serious effort by the NOPD and the family, no body was ever recovered.”

Ana focused on her p-pc. “Okay, I was wrong.”

Kyra chuckled. “Run a search on the New South Militia.”

“Already in progress. Looks like it was a group led mostly by older men. There are only a few known members still living. Two are currently working on the Space Station Delta; the other is ... I’ll be damned.”

“Great, I’m so glad you’re praying for me,” Kyra returned dryly.

“Billy Joe Canton.” Ana met her eyes in the rearview mirror.

“Well, we’ll both be damned.” Kyra checked her comm-u. “Have him picked up. Our next conversation isn’t going to be in that cramped little shop of his.”

“Want me to ask the transport team to pick you up that vest?”

“Shut up.”

Chapter Fifteen

Billy Joe Canton, sans really hot leather vest, was in an interrogation room by the time Kyra returned to the station. Ana and Liz had followed her into the observation room. Billy Joe paced around the small space, his hands fisted in the pockets of his jeans. His white hair was neatly combed.

“He looks nervous.”

“Riding in the back of a police van can be nerve-wracking.”

“Yeah.” Kyra crossed her arms over her breasts as she watched him. “I’m going to go in first. Give me ten minutes, Ana, and come in if he isn’t talking. Make sure you have your crown in place.”

Ana watched her leave. “I figured she’d take you in.”

Liz chuckled. “Nah, Inspector Moray likes to be the big dog in the room; the big, bad, vicious dog. I almost feel sorry for this guy. He’ll be in shreds, and he won’t even know it for hours.”

Kyra sat down at the table and stared at Billy Joe until he took the chair across from her. “Would you like an advocate at this time?”

“Don’t need a fucking lawyer. Did nothing wrong.”

“We’ve yet to determine that.”

“Look, you call me, you come to my place, and I answered all of your questions.” He stabbed his finger at the surface of the table as he spoke. “You got no call to drag me down here. I was just getting ready to eat when your uniforms showed up.”

“I can see that you get a meal if you need one.” Kyra looked over his face, and she shook her head. “Tell me something, Billy Joe.”

"I'll tell you anything you wanna hear," he declared.

"New South Militia."

He stilled and pulled his hands off the table. "That was almost twenty years ago."

"Such groups were commonplace back then. Must have been the thing to do, find an antigovernment group to belong to, stockpile weapons, and wait for the rebellion to begin. Is that what you did?"

"Sure, and so did half of the citizens in this country. The president was lying to us. Our children were dying in a war that was poorly planned and executed for pure power."

"I remember."

"Barely, I imagine." He shrugged. "So I found some people who thought like me, and we prepared for the worst. It wouldn't be the first time men and women in this country have taken up arms to defend our freedom."

"Jake Belton."

"Yeah, knew that crazy son of a bitch."

"Tell me about him."

"He was just crazy, is all. Beat on his woman. I never took with that crap, you know. You make a woman your family, and you treat her like you'd treat yourself. My mama taught me that." Billy Joe shrugged.

"Jake beat Nera," she prompted.

"Yeah, that was her name. She was one of those Voodoo priestesses. Hell, if I hadn't had enough respect for women not to hit one, I sure as hell wouldn't have hit a woman in Voodoo. I kept telling him he was going to wake up one day without his dick or something."

"She never defended herself?"

"Don't rightly know. He slapped her one night in front of me. I swear you could feel the hatred moving between them. You'd think she'd leave, but she didn't."

"And he killed her."

"That's what they say." Billy Joe shrugged. "Fact is, no one rightly knows. That house burned for nearly two days. The fire department couldn't put it out. They just stood around and tried to make sure that the houses close to it didn't catch fire, too."

"And they didn't?"

"No. They didn't. Didn't even scorch the grass in the yard. The fucker just burned down to the foundation and then the fire went out. Damnedest thing I'd ever seen." He pulled his arms close to his body and shook his head.

"Do you believe that the Belton family died in that house?"

"Not for sure."

"Have you seen a member of the Belton family since that night?" Kyra asked pointedly.

He leaned forward and cleared his throat. "See, I had me a trapping shack near their place. Just used it to store skins while I was curing them. About a year after that house burned, I'm up in my shack and I go out the door, and I see something moving in the trees on the Belton land. I ain't gonna say I'm a man that spooks easily -- but I cleared my shack out and never went back."

"Never?"

"Never." He cleared his throat. "My wife teased me a bit about it. Made me feel foolish, but I couldn't make myself go back."

"It's been twenty years."

"Yes, and that's just fine with me. I didn't need that trapping shack anyways. I had two deeper in the bayou. Better places, and I didn't have to worry about the pissed-off ghost of a Voodoo priestess messin' with me."

"A ghost?"

"Go ahead, laugh at an old man." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Knew you were a mean one when you come to my place." His gaze narrowed. "Should have bought the vest."

"Jake Belton?"

"Yeah."

"What else about him?"

"He was a whoring bastard if I ever met one. When he wasn't kicking the shit out of his wife, he was finding some woman to bang on. I met him through the New South Militia." He cut his gaze toward her. "But I imagine you already knew that."

"Yes." She folded her hands on the table in front of her and met his gaze. "What about Aaron?"

"He was his father's son."

"Elaborate."

"Ah, hell, he was just a kid. He hadn't had time to become anything when that house burned down." He paused and swallowed hard. "Aaron was mean, like a wild dog sometimes."

"His father was rough on him?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Aaron was mean," Kyra repeated and then raised an eyebrow.

Billy Joe shrugged. "Caught him skinning an animal once."

"He hunted with his father?"

"Sure; it was illegal at the time, but most folks in these parts didn't care. Anyways, the thing is, the animal wasn't dead."

"He was skinning a live animal?"

"Yeah, his neighbor's cat." Billy Joe pursed his lips. "It was something else, that is for sure. I made him set the animal free, but it had to be put down."

"Did Aaron make any attempt to explain himself?"

"Nope. I told his daddy, but I doubt Jake did a thing about it. He let that kid run wild, and encouraged him to fight with other kids. I didn't let mine play with him. I have girls; didn't think Aaron would be any better than his daddy."

"Aaron was cruel to little girls in his neighborhood," Kyra murmured.

"As I said, he was his daddy's son." He sat back in his chair. "Where's that pretty girl with the Yankee accent?"

"My partner, Constable Salanti, is currently on the observation deck watching you and me talk."

"You always tell the truth?"

"If I can."

"Why are you interested in a bunch of dead people?"

"Because I don't think all three members of the Belton family are dead." Kyra paused. "Do you remember the three other children that died around the same time Aaron supposedly did?"

"Yeah, it was big news then. Those poor little boys murdered like that." He frowned. "I'm ashamed to say that at the time I was relieved that all I had was girls."

"The three little boys were friends with Aaron Belton."

The statement sat between them for a few seconds, and then Billy nodded. "That Killian boy, he used to come around the neighborhood a lot. My youngest girl had something of a crush on him. She was really hurt when they found him dead. He'd been a good-looking boy, smart. I never could figure why he was friends with a little creep like Aaron."

"You think he told us everything?"

"Yeah. He's a good ole boy, but not one that would harbor a man like Aaron. He has daughters, and he's been watching the news. He'll go home and lock his family up good and tight."

"Do you still think it was the father who did the killing that night?"

"It made the most sense before." Kyra sat back in her chair and looked at Desi.

Ana turned in her desk chair. "I have the address on the Belton place. It's out in the middle of nowhere. Most of the houses in that area were condemned years ago. The city has plans to rezone it in the next five years and give it over to the conservationist preserve."

It was, without a doubt, the weirdest damn thing she'd ever seen. And that was saying a lot. Kyra kicked the blackened foundation with her boot. "How the hell does something like this stay here for twenty years?"

"The land has changed hands several times, but for some reason or another, every buyer decided to not build on it. The city purchased it from Reginald Hawking four years ago. They've been buying land in this area for years." Ana hesitantly stepped up onto the foundation and walked around. "Will all of our cases be this damn weird?"

Kyra laughed. "Well, as the senior inspector for Major Crimes in the largest district in New Orleans, a lot of the weird crap does fall on my desk." She slid her hand up her side to check her gun, and grimaced. The place was getting to her, too. "Let's find Billy Joe's shack."

"Surely it isn't still here?" Ana jumped down from the foundation and trotted after her. "You know, I chose District 4 when I graduated from the academy. A lot of the recruits wanted 1 or 2 because of the big fancy neighborhoods and low crime."

"So you chose the worst out of the four?" She laughed.

"Yeah. Who wants to ride shotgun on poodle patrol?"

Kyra went back to her vehicle and opened the rear. She pulled out two large flashlights. "State park land begins about ten feet past the Belton property line. If the shack is here, it was probably taken over by another *conservationist* when Billy Joe gave it up. If I remember correctly, the Conservationist Hunting Act passed about two years after the Belton's place burned."

"You don't like conservationists."

"Not true. The practice is sound. Man managed to obliterate natural predators and destroy habitat to the point that only controlled animal populations can exist with a good standard of living. I'm all for genetic branding and smart hunting. I just don't know why they *have* to call themselves conservationists. It just riles people up. Conservationists used to be the people who fought against the destruction of habitat, the mass murder of God's little creatures." Kyra jerked her flashlight around. "We've got a trail here, a well-worn trail."

The shack was actually a five-by-eight cinderblock building with a sturdy metal roof and a digital combination lock. Kyra ran her light around the ground in front of the shed and then went back to the lock. "Find out who the lock is registered to."

Ana tucked her flashlight into her hand and pulled out her p-pc. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that this structure is a little too damn fancy for a skinning shack. The big hunters, who would have that kind of money, don't do their own skinning. This is something else."

"Something else, indeed." Ana frowned as she scrolled through records. "The lock is registered to a Jake Waterman, but the shack is still in Billy Joe's name."

Kyra turned to glare at her. "Are you kidding me?"

“Nope.”

“Son of a bitch. Get Billy Joe on the comm-u.”

Billy Joe shut the door of his vehicle and walked toward the two of them reluctantly. “Now, I gotta tell you ladies, I’m getting sort of tired of seeing you.”

“Yeah, well, you aren’t our idea of a hot date, either.” Kyra motioned toward the shack. “This is your place?”

He frowned and nodded. “Yeah. The roof is new, but it’s mine. Since I host other hunters, I always try to build sturdy shacks. No need to build something the bayou will swallow up in a few years. It would just be a waste of credits. I’m surprised to see it’s still private. I haven’t paid the maintenance taxes on it in years, figured the park service would have taken it over by now.”

“The lock?”

“Never bother to lock my shacks.”

Kyra pulled out her gun and took dead aim at the lock. She fired, and the lock hissed with the impact of the electrically charged bullet. She fired a second time, and the lock swung loose from the wall to dangle by a single wire.

“You sure showed that lock,” Ana murmured dryly as she watched Kyra jerk at the door. It opened, and she hesitantly moved forward to follow.

“You stay put.” Kyra pointed at Billy Joe.

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Kyra let the beam of her flashlight slide around the room. Neat and orderly shelves ran along the wall. At the end of the first shelf system, she found a single shelf with a mirror above it, and a series of glass cases filled with liquid. The skin was attached to the back of the thin glass box; the tattoo of a black cat with jewel-green eyes blinked at her.

“Oh, God.”

“Don’t throw up in here.”

“I won’t!” Ana insisted.

“Donna LaRoux, Janie Monroe.” Kyra paused at the skin in the next box. “He put the tattoo back on Stacy before he killed her.” The fanciful blue dragon with its fairy wings made her stomach roll. The next box on the shelf held skin from the dead cop, identified by an intricate and detailed rendition of a badge. “And he tattooed Casey, as well.”

“The sick bastard.” Ana used her p-pc to take pictures of each case and then cleared her throat. “I’ve put in a request for a CSU team.”

“Get Marcos out here, too.”

Kyra moved her flashlight around and found a board full of pictures on the back wall of the structure. "He spent a lot of time watching them." As she'd suspected, there were no pictures of Casey. "He chose her because of me."

"She worked the first two scenes. He could have chosen her then."

"He could have just as easily chosen you." Kyra turned to look at her. "He didn't take you because he didn't want me to take it personally."

"Every cop takes the death of another very personally."

"I guess he doesn't agree." Kyra looked back to the pictures, her gaze running over the faces of the dead women. She didn't agree, either; she knew she would have taken the death of her partner far more personally than she had a cop she'd only spoken to once. "He thinks we're playing a game."

"Yeah."

"He sat there right in front of me and told me how Donna was a victim of her family's love and overprotectiveness, when all along she was really his victim. A victim of his anger and hatred." The thought that he had been so close in the very beginning made her blood boil. "I never once considered him a serious suspect in Donna's murder."

"He didn't have a motive."

"No. He still doesn't, yet we know he did it." Her gaze jerked back to the pictures. "Glory." She reached out to the candid picture of her friend, but pulled her hand back.

With a shaking hand, Kyra punched Glory's code into her comm-u. The call was answered in three rings. "Glory, where are you?"

"Inspector, I'm so glad you called."

Kyra closed her eyes and didn't react when Ana grabbed her arm to steady her. "Hello, Aaron."

"I haven't been Aaron in quite a while."

"You're Aaron to me," Kyra responded. She opened her eyes and lowered her gaze to the ground. "Have you killed her?"

"No. No, not yet." He sighed. "So glorious is Glory. I know you think so. Your best friend?"

"We've known each other for a long time." Kyra walked out of the shed and looked around. "Do you know where I am, Aaron?"

"No. Let me guess? Are you at the station or perhaps you are at home? Are you lying in your bed, Kyra? Did that new man of yours fuck you well?"

"No, you aren't very good at guessing." She looked back to the shed. "You really should have taken the time to paint the roof. It's starting to rust."

Silence followed her gently spoken words.

"Come now, Aaron, the silent treatment?"

“Don’t touch them! You can’t touch them!”

“What you took? I can’t touch what you took?” She looked back to the shed and then to Ana, who was on her own comm-u several yards away. “You know, Aaron, almost everyone believes you’re insane. It’s a good thing for you; you won’t be executed or put into a general population prison. They’ll put you in a private room in a hospital. A nice, private place where you can learn to be a better person.”

“I’m not going into any fucking hospital!”

“Well, that wouldn’t be my preference, either.” She closed her eyes. “I’d like to put you in a hole. A nice, deep hole. I might even let you have a coffin.”

“Listen, and listen well. I am in control here. I have your friend, Kyra. Your glorious and beautiful friend, and I’ll make her pay for every wrong you’ve done me. Did you honestly think that dead cop was your punishment? Did you?” He laughed softly as if amused by his own words. “She got in my way, but she made a pretty edition to the legacy.”

“You should have come at me.”

“What fun would that be? You wouldn’t scream for me or cry. You wouldn’t beg me to stop. Not you, never you. But she’ll cry for me. She’ll cry and scream and beg. She’ll call out for help. For you. But you won’t be here in time. You won’t make it, Kyra. You’ll be too late. Too late, again. You will figure out where I’ve left your dear dead friend, and then, Kyra, then you’ll cry. You’ll rage that you could not stop me. Rage that you aren’t a good enough cop to protect her.”

Kyra was still long after he disconnected. She was as close to shattering into a million pieces as she ever had been in her life. An unwanted image from her childhood swept through her mind, and she stumbled backward and would have fallen if Ana hadn’t steadied her.

“They couldn’t trace it.”

“He would have thought of that.” She cleared her throat. The image of her mother, dead on the bathroom floor, lingered another few seconds; she pushed it far back.

“Where would he take her?” Ana asked softly. “He’s looked at you, Kyra, looked at your life and your past. Where would he have taken her?”

Kyra shook her head. “Too late, again.” She rubbed her face and winced when a stream of headlights hit her. The CSU unit had arrived. “Billy Joe, you stay and give the team the permissions they need to complete the search. It’s your property.”

Billy Joe nodded and walked off toward the CSU van.

“He never gave me any clue as to how to find the other women. He didn’t want me to find the other women.” Kyra shuddered and rubbed her face.

“No, but he wants you to find Glory.”

“Too late, again.”

"It would be very personal," Ana whispered.

Kyra nodded. "Yes, personal. He wouldn't have used an old case against me. He knows that I wouldn't be the cop I am if I couldn't let those failures go."

"Kyra, who has died in your life? Someone important."

"My first partner, but I was on the scene." She rubbed her face. "My mother, but she died when I was young." Her mother on the bathroom floor. Dried blood on the floor. How long had her mother lain there? Kyra shuddered because suddenly she knew. "Christ." She punched her grandmother's number in and waited with closed eyes until she answered. "Nana."

"Kyra, dear, it's the middle of the night."

"Nana, please, look out to the carriage house. Tell me what you see."

"Let me get up."

Kyra listened in silence and started walking toward her vehicle, Ana silent beside her. "Nana."

"I'm looking," Sharon snapped. "Oh, well, there is a light on. Should I send Henry out to investigate?"

Kyra blanched at the thought. "No, absolutely not! You and the mayor stay in the house. Make sure your security system is armed."

"Kyra, you're frightening me."

She yanked the transport door close and started the engine. "Good. You keep your ass upstairs in your bedroom, and the mayor does not leave that house. Understood?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

Kyra disconnected without another word. She half-listened as Ana rattled off instructions to dispatch.

"Tell me."

"No."

"I have a right to know before we go into that house."

She did. God, she did have a right to know. Kyra swallowed hard, and for a second, just a second, wanted to lie. Wanted to be able to lie. "My mother killed herself in that carriage house."

"Ah, crap."

"I was eight. She woke me up that morning, got me ready for school like it was any other day, told me how much she loved me, and then she kissed me goodbye." Kyra cleared her throat. "When I came home from school, I found her on the bathroom floor. She'd slit her wrists."

"You found her."

"Yes."

"He knows that."

"Yes."

"How the hell does he know that?" Ana demanded. "Our records are sealed when they issue our badge."

"You'll have to remember to ask him that before I shove my foot through his head."

Kyra gripped the wheel tighter as she considered what she might find in that horrible, sprawling bathroom. She hadn't gone into the carriage house since that day. "He said that Casey got in his way."

"So, he was using her?"

"Yes. Her psych profile indicated that she was a careful and reasoned thinker. She wouldn't have gone off half-cocked after a killer. She must have given something away when she realized that her suspicions about him were true." Kyra let herself wrangle with those questions, as her mind could not fully wrap itself around the thought of her best friend in the hands of a madman.

The driveway was lit when she arrived, and so was every light in the house. Her grandmother must have hit the emergency call button on her security system. Kyra shoved the vehicle into park just inches from her grandmother's newly renovated antebellum porch and swung out of the vehicle, pulling her weapon.

She pointed one finger at her grandmother and the mayor, who came bustling out of the house. "Back in the house. I have backup on the way."

"Kyra," Sharon gasped.

"Just get back in the damn house," Kyra shouted over her shoulder as she ran toward the carriage house. All the lights were on in it, as well.

The front door was standing open; a chair on the porch was turned over. It looked for all the world like what it was -- a mausoleum. Sharon Moray had changed nothing about the house since her daughter killed herself in it. Kyra pushed back memories as she rushed through the house, her gaze darting into the rooms that had once been her whole world.

Kyra sucked in a breath as she grabbed the bathroom doorknob. "I'm going to kill him when I find him."

"Okay."

"You just need to know that. I won't expect you to cover for me."

Kyra didn't wait for Ana to respond; she pushed open the door, and her knees buckled.

Leaving her gun on the floor, she crawled to Glory and pulled her pale and seemingly lifeless body into her lap. Blood was gushing out of her; he'd cut both her wrists halfway to the elbows. "Thank God." Kyra tightened her hold on her. "She's breathing."

“I know.” Ana jerked her belt loose from her pants and yanked it tight on one of Glory’s arms. “We have to slow the bleeding down or she’ll bleed out before the medics get here.”

Using one hand, Kyra unbuckled her belt and pulled it loose. “How long?”

“Not long.” Ana grabbed Kyra’s belt and started working on the other arm.

Kyra nodded abruptly and shook Glory. “Glory? Can you hear me?”

Ana leaned forward and resisted the urge to pat her partner. “She just needs to hold on.”

* * * * *

I gave too much away. She found her too soon. I know we can’t begin to break her until we’ve made her suffer. The friend was supposed to die; another failure. She has to be weakened if she is to become the vessel of your glorious spirit.

How do you stand to love me, with all of my failures? No, no, I know I shouldn’t doubt you. You do love me. You love me for the sacrifices I’ve made, all of them. You are the only one who ever loved me enough.

Chapter Sixteen

Kyra held her hands under the faucet until the water no longer ran pink. Ana was beside her, drying her hands with a towel. "She'll be okay."

"Yeah," Ana agreed. "She'll be fine."

Kyra took the towel when she offered it and started drying her hands. "She doesn't have any family."

"You should go be with her."

"No. I have to find this son of a bitch." Kyra tossed the towel aside and engaged her comm-u.

Ana went to retrieve the hand towel, which she folded and set on the counter next to the sink.

Kyra walked out of the kitchen and into the foyer of her grandmother's home. "Alex."

"Hey, beautiful."

"I need you to do me a favor."

"Sure. Now?"

"Yeah, now." Kyra leaned against the wall. "Glory was taken in a med-flight unit to Memorial Hospital South. I need you to be there for her. I'll clear you through the guards."

"How bad?"

"Bad. I don't want her to be alone, Alex."

"She won't." He paused. "What happened to her?"

"She was attacked. I'll tell you more later. Now, I just need to know that you have this, that you'll make sure she has everything she needs."

"I'll take care of her."

Kyra nodded and blinked back tears. She wasn't going to cry; she couldn't let herself get that far gone. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

She ended the transmission and looked back at Ana. "Make sure the officers assigned to her know that he and his brother have access."

"Already submitted the order." Ana followed her as she strode down the hall of what could only be called the plantation house. "Your nana and the mayor had on matching pajamas."

Kyra turned to look at her, a smile hovering on her lips. "Can you imagine?"

"It was charming. I wonder if he has one of those old-fashioned bed caps?"

They stopped talking as they walked into the main foyer, where Sharon Moray was holding court. "Thank you, officers; I'll take it from here." She watched in silence as they left the room; then she walked to the settee where her grandmother was sitting. "How much do you want to know?"

"I'm not a fragile ninny, Kyra. I want to know it all."

"A man calling himself the Waterman has been killing women in the city."

"Yes, I watch the news."

"Tonight, he kidnapped Glory James and ..." She sucked in a breath. "He cut her open, wrist to elbow, and left her to die in the bathroom of the carriage house."

What color had remained in Sharon's face drained quickly. She turned furious eyes on the mayor. "Damn you, Henry. You promised me that the files pertaining to Alicia were sealed!"

"They *are* sealed." Kyra took her hand and held it tightly. "Whatever he has found out about my mother and her death ... it wasn't through official records. He was impersonating a dead boy and working on the mayor's re-election campaign."

Sharon nodded and glared once more at the mayor. Kyra almost felt sorry for him. "What about Glory?"

"She's got a very good chance."

Sharon stood abruptly. "Okay, then. I'm going to get dressed and go to the hospital. Henry, you are going to go downtown and prepare a press conference or whatever mayors do when there's a bloody serial killer loose in their city. Kyra, you and your lovely partner are going to get that bastard that invaded my property and hurt Glory."

Kyra watched her stalk from the room. "Sir, I would suggest that you go along with her and do whatever it is she thinks you should. It'll be less painful." She checked her gun and wondered when she'd picked up. "Let's go."

"Get a note to the guards on duty that my grandmother is coming down there to take charge."

"She did well."

"Nana is the queen of disaster management. She'll have herself a good old-fashioned hissy fit later." Kyra pushed her p-pc into its slot in the dash to charge, then looked at her partner.

Ana looked back at her. "We need to know if Glory saw him."

Kyra grimaced, but input Alex's code; his voice filled her ear immediately. "I can't think about how she is."

"Okay," he said simply.

"Has she been awake?"

"Yes, they put her in a room about twenty minutes ago. She's been asking for you since I arrived."

"Just tell her that I'll get there when I can. I need to know what she remembers, Alex."

"She's been talking to us. Marcus is recording it with a p-pc; he figured you'd want it." His voice softened. "They had to give her blood replacement, and they're making arrangements for a surgery to do some repairs. The skin surgeon is confident that she won't scar."

"Thanks." She focused on the road and blinked rapidly to keep the tears that welled up in her eyes at bay. "Have Marcus forward me what he has immediately."

"Yeah."

Kyra disconnected the call and cleared her throat. "They gave her blood replacement, and they'll have to do surgery to repair her arms."

"Good." Ana was looking out the window, her body rigid. "Do you trust me?"

Kyra glanced in her direction and then focused on the road. "I trust that you are a good cop, and that you'll have my back if the time comes. Personally, Ana, we haven't spent enough time together to get to know each other."

"Fair enough."

"I wouldn't have taken you on as a partner if I'd been worried about you being able to function with me in the field." Kyra looked at her again. "What's on your mind?"

"Earlier, you said you don't expect me to cover for you if you kill the suspect."

"Good cops don't cover up the actions of anyone that steps outside the law. There are plenty in the department that follow that blue wall crap, and it makes me sick. We didn't take this job on to form some sort of fraternity where we pick and choose the criminals we'll bring to justice."

"Okay." Ana fidgeted in her seat for a few minutes.

Silence settled over them as they turned off the highway and onto the narrow road that would lead to Aaron's storage shed. Kyra cleared her throat and changed the subject

abruptly. "The trophies are important to him, so very important. He'll be desperate to find a way to get to them."

"Yeah. That water ritual you spoke of in your reports?"

"The *verser* is the pouring of water or liquor onto the ground for the *loa*. It's like an offering. The *loa* is the spirit."

"So, Aaron is using bodies of the victims to represent the ground. The question is, just whose *loa* is he making all of these offerings to?"

"I want to think it's the mother. That he's trying to in some way cleanse her soul for the way she died."

"But?"

"Why is he killing other women?"

"His father abused and misused women at his leisure," Ana murmured. "Aaron considers them disposable."

"Yes, and which parent would have encouraged that belief in him?"

"The father." Ana frowned as she considered what Kyra was saying. "Jake Belton killed his wife and in some way blamed her way of life for her death. Now, Aaron is using Voodoo in a misguided effort to cleanse her soul of evil."

"Or Nera killed her husband for the abuse and the womanizing. She set the house on fire to cover up the crime and disappeared into the bayou with the kid. She spends years telling him how worthless and wretched his father was for his womanizing. Aaron grows to hate her, and women in general, for the murder of his father."

"Okay, say I buy that theory ... what's up with the tattoos?"

"In Voodoo, elaborate depictions of gods or ancestral spirits are drawn. These pictures are usually drawn with a fine powdery substance before the ceremony and are destroyed during the ceremony. These pictures are called *veves*. The *veves* are used to draw down the spirits of the dead to the material plane."

"He's trying to resurrect one of his parents."

"It makes sense."

"The bones and ashes in the jar?"

"The *govi* that he sent me probably contained his first victim, a ritualistic reproduction of his parent's death. Which parent is anyone's guess at this point." Kyra pulled to a stop behind a large evidence transport and looked at her. "Find Dr. Marcos. I want to know exactly what she's found."

Kyra found Desi Marcos under a shelf, with her ass in the air. "Dr. Marcos."

Desi jumped and hit her head. "Crap!" She pulled out and rubbed the back of her head. "Inspector, you have impeccable timing."

"Tell me what you've found."

"Well, beyond the glass boxes that you discovered, we found photos of five different women, each in six different locations, one photo per location." She grimaced when she looked at Kyra. "I would say he followed the original targets around for about six days each, because none of them are wearing the same clothes in the pictures. We found several pictures of Glory James, but they were all taken on the same day. She certainly wasn't someone he planned to take."

"He tattooed six women."

"Yes, he must have the pictures of his sixth victim with him." She stood and dusted off her pants. "We also found the mold he used to create the wax doll."

"And he chose me as his victim," Kyra muttered dryly. "That was a mistake."

"He still needs to have two more for the tattoo series." Desi motioned toward the glass boxes as a CSU tech entered the shack. "There are two empty boxes. He's using his own urine to cure the skin."

"I figured." Kyra grimaced. "Nasty motherfucker."

"Thank you." Desi took the crow bar and dropped back down on her knees. She motioned to the tech that was hovering near her. "Noah Heath. I stole him from District 1. Noah, tell the inspector about the mini-disks."

He turned to Kyra. "We found five mini-disks with information on the victims that he tattooed, including the one that moved to Moon Colony after Mardi Gras. His pictures of her were taken in the colony installation. Since she was the last potential victim to be tattooed, we can assume he had or has plans to go to the moon to take her out."

"His fifth victim of choice would have been the district attorney." She looked at the pictures of the woman in question, one of them taken while she was obviously in court. "She rarely argues cases. It might be beneficial to figure out which one that was."

"It was the Dennison case." Desi shoved a crowbar into the small slot she'd managed to dig out of the wood and jerked on it. "I did the research for that case. Man, he was an asshole. He bilked hundreds of people out of their government settlements. We're talking billions of dollars. She nailed him to the wall. It was a good trial." She jerked on the plank again and it popped free. "Watch your feet," she warned as she tossed the plank and crowbar out behind her.

Emerging with large, leather-bound book, Desi stood and flipped it open. "Man, oh, man."

"What?"

"He kept a diary. Holy crap, this is awesome." She flipped through another page. "Totally psycho, but awesome. I have to get this back to the station."

Kyra took the book from her and passed it to Noah. "Take that back to the station and start transcribing it." She turned to Desi. "I need your help."

"Come on, Inspector, that's prime evidence." She looked mournfully around Kyra to Noah and the book. "It's not fair; I found it."

"I need you to find him."

"How?" Her curiosity immediately kicked into gear.

"He's got Glory James's comm-u. He has the signal blocked for normal tracking, but I figure you might have a few tricks of your own" She jerked her head. "Get your gear. I'm going to give this asshole a call."

Kyra pulled out her p-pc as she climbed into the driver's seat, then handed the unit to Ana. "Check for the recording."

Ana nodded and flipped through a couple of screens. "It's here."

"Play it."

"Kyra ..."

"Just play it." She tightened her grip on the steering wheel as Glory's voice, groggy with drugs, filled the vehicle.

"He grabbed me off the street."

"Kyra is going to need you to tell us what you can."

"She found me."

"Yes, she found you." Alex's voice was soft and patient. *"Tell us about the man who took you."*

"He was young, short blond hair. Very short, it didn't look right for his face."

"Where did he take you first?"

"I don't know. I remember the van. The floor wasn't carpeted, and it hurt to lay on it. He stopped it, and he came back to me ..." A soft sob broke into the recording, and Kyra's stomach rolled. She knew what was coming, and hearing the words was like a knife in her heart. *"He raped me. I tried to stop him. He was just so strong."*

"Have you ever seen him before?"

"Yes, on the news. He was going to kill me. I knew it. I knew who he was." Her voice caught, and anger mingled with her next words. *"I told him he had the wrong woman, that I didn't have a tattoo. He said that it didn't matter, that I was a personal gift. A gift from him to Kyra."*

"Do you need some water?"

"No. I need to tell Kyra." The sound of a comm-u activating filled the car.

"Just relax," Marcus whispered. *"Do you need something for the pain?"*

"No. Who is he talking to?"

"Probably Kyra."

"You have to tell her what I did."

"What did you do, Glory?"

"I put my p-pc under his front seat. After he raped me, I pretended to pass out. When he left me, I pulled my p-pc out of my purse and turned it on. It's under his driver's seat. She has to catch up with him before the battery wears down."

"How much time does it have left?"

"I charged it yesterday afternoon; maybe six or seven hours."

"Alex?"

"Yeah, Kyra said she would be here as soon as she can. She wants to you to transfer what Glory has been able to tell you to her p-pc."

"Tell her she can't kill him."

"Kyra is a good cop, Glory. She won't do anything she can't live with."

"Make sure you tell her. She can't kill him. He isn't worth what it would cost her."

The recording ended abruptly.

Kyra turned on the vehicle and engaged her comm-u. He must have been waiting, because Glory's comm-u connected immediately. "I imagine you're disappointed."

"I underestimated you. It won't happen again," he snapped, his voice brittle.

"You can't even comprehend the kind of enemy I am, Aaron. When I catch up with you, I'm going to redefine your whole fucking world."

"You're just a woman."

"And you're just a weak little mama's boy who doesn't know how to play in the real world."

"Shut up, you stupid bitch!"

Kyra settled back in her seat. "How did you feel when you killed your mother? Was it worth it? Does her voice haunt you? You'll spend years answering those questions. I have a team of doctors three miles long waiting to get ahold of you. They consider you unique and special. Me, I just think you're a waste of flesh and bone."

"I thought about you when I raped your friend. She screamed for you, for help."

"I'll have you screaming for your dead mommy as soon I get my hands on you." She disconnected the transmission abruptly and turned to look at Desi, who was setting up in the backseat. "Get Glory's p-pc GPS code and find him."

"I've already got the request into ComSen. I should have the code any second now."

Kyra grimaced. She hated just about anything to do with Computer Sentinel, but in this case, they did seem to serving a purpose. "Feed the information into the navigation system as soon as possible."

"I'll have to borrow a satellite. Give me a second."

"Borrow a satellite?" Kyra demanded.

"Ours was appropriated by the Coast Guard six hours ago for a joint operation with the DEA." Desi popped her gum. "I could take it back, but I'd prefer just to borrow another and let them get their guy."

"Yeah. Just hurry."

"Done." She blew a bubble. "I hope the greater metro area of New Orleans will forgive me for interrupting their *I Love Lucy* re-runs."

"You stole satellite feed from a vid-network?"

"Yeah." Desi popped her gum. "Inputting into the navigation system now. If anyone asks, we'll just say I made an error. Oh, wow, he's close. Six miles north of our current location. We're going to need a portable GPS ..." She opened up a large plastic case to her left and started rummaging. "And a boat. We're going to need a boat."

Kyra checked her weapon and then looked at Ana, who was preparing the land/water craft they'd just succeeded in borrowing for departure. She looked back to Desi, who was still rummaging through her cases.

"Dr. Marcos."

"Yeah?"

"Don't forget your weapon."

Her mouth dropped open briefly; then she closed it and went back to rummaging for equipment. "I've only fired my gun on the range and simulations."

"You have a nice, shiny detective badge, Desdemona. It's about time you used it."

Desi looked toward her and bit down on her bottom lip. "You know it was honorary, right?"

Kyra laughed. "Get your crap; we're leaving." She strode away and managed to look stern when she got to the dock. "Thanks, Clara."

Clara crossed her arms over her breasts and nodded. "You find that boy, and you make him pay for what he did."

"I will."

"Glory is a beautiful woman. I've always found your friendship with her your saving grace."

Kyra paused. "Which one of you is a client?"

Clara laughed. "I'm hers, actually. She cuts and styles my hair personally once a week. I bring her dried seasoning and herbs occasionally. My boys are down at the hospital with her. Thought I might go see her myself."

"Do that; she could use another familiar face." Kyra pulled off her jacket and tossed it into the watercraft. "You don't actually travel around in this thing, do you?"

"I do. Alex bought it for my birthday." Clara put her hands on her hips. "Don't get scratches on it." She sniffed as Desi rushed past her and dropped down into the boat. "I see you've added another member to your super bitch cop squad."

Kyra laughed aloud as she stepped off the dock and into the boat. "You are unique in this world, Clara."

"Be careful."

"We will." Kyra punched in the start code, put the vehicle in gear, and shot away from the dock.

The bayou, despite the urban development around it, was wild and dark. The rotting vegetation around them gave off a foul and lingering odor that made Kyra long for a sterile environment like the morgue. The damp air seemed to settle over them as she navigated the boat away from the dock and into the narrow waterway.

It was after three in the morning, and every creature that hunted was out and about. Kyra barely acknowledged when Ana pressed four reflective orange triangles on her clothes, one for each arm, and one for the front and back. There would be plenty of two-legged hunters about as well.

"East." Desi pointed at the watercraft's navigation unit and started inputting her data. "We're the blue dot; his van is the red."

"If he drove there, we could have, too." Kyra pointed out dryly.

"This is a shorter route, and I doubt he'll be watching the waterway." She chewed her gum rapidly. "Besides, this is a lot more interesting."

"Ana."

"Yeah." Ana came over to them, shrugging on a shoulder holster for her gun. She'd abandoned the utility belt that came with her uniform.

Kyra pointed to the map. "I'm going to leave the boat here. The two of you will go the rest of the way in and signal for backup once we've confirmed that he's actually in the area. Neither one of you are to advance on the target until you get my signal."

Ana nodded and picked up the three short-range radios Desi had brought. She hesitated a fraction of a second before pressing one into Kyra's hand. "You realize that I need years and years of training."

Kyra smiled briefly. "Let's do this."

Ana was silent until Kyra jumped from the craft and hit the shore at a dead run. "We need to hurry."

"Why?" Desi demanded. "What's going on?"

"Two hours ago she was on the floor in a bathroom -- the same bathroom her mother killed herself in -- holding her best friend and rocking her like a baby." Ana swallowed hard.

“Blood was gushing out of Glory James, and Kyra just tightened her grip on her as if she could hold onto her life with her bare hands.”

Desi shoved the craft into gear and shook her head. “We really need to hurry.”

Kyra pointed her weapon toward the ground as she moved. The dark blue van she’d spent the better part of a week looking for was parked in a narrow driveway a hundred yards from her. The house on stilts was ragged and barely looked livable. She imagined that it didn’t meet any building codes. There were many shacks just like it on the bayou. Most were used by hunters, or by the park service.

She pulled the orange reflective stickers from her arms and chest and shoved them into her pocket. The lights in the shack were bright, and it was easy to make out the area around it. She’d have no cover once she was out of the trees that lined his driveway.

The distant hum of the watercraft shook her from her thoughts, and she plucked her radio off her waistband. “Cut the engine; I can hear it.”

The hum ceased immediately. “We’ll come the rest of the way on foot.”

“Be careful. He’s got the area surrounding the shack clear; you won’t have any cover.” Kyra shoved the small radio into her pocket and walked quickly along the driveway.

Once even with the van, she pulled her utility tool out of her boot and darted across to the vehicle. Since the tires were probably puncture proof and there was no point in trying to slash them, she slid under the vehicle and knocked the power panel loose. The battery was almost fully charged. She grimaced at the coming discomfort, then grabbed the battery and jerked it free of its compartment. A mild charge nipped at the tips of her fingers before she tossed the battery aside. She flipped open the utility tool and used the screwdriver to remove the energy exchange mechanism. Without it, even with the battery back in place, he’d never be able to start the van.

Kyra pushed the exchanger into her back pocket as she slid from the van and rolled to her feet. With his van disabled, his only choice would be to go to ground if he escaped her, and then she could spend a few hours stalking his crazy ass through the bayou. That suited her just fine. Either way, he wouldn’t get away. It wasn’t an option.

Crouching low, she made her way toward the shack, avoiding as much of the light as she could. He wasn’t worried. He thought he was safe. How would he be if he knew she was close? Would he be pacing the floor and trying to find a way out? Did he have a plan to get out already? With one foot on the first step of the flight of wooden stairs, Kyra looked toward the area she assumed her partner and Marcos would come from. They were moving toward her. She couldn’t hear or see them, but she knew.

She tested each wooden step as she slowly moved up the stairs. They proved to be steady. The porch was about eight feet wide and barren. The tiny porch light flickered with

the wind. Kyra leveled her gun and moved to the door. Would he have a back exit? Where the hell was Ana?

Tilting her head back briefly, she took a deep breath and moved along the wall to the only window on the porch of the one-room dwelling. A vid-panel was the first thing she saw. It flickered much like the porch light did. There was one chair in the room, one person. He was reclined in the chair, his face grizzled with several weeks of beard, and a bag of pork skins was propped up on his belly.

It was not Aaron Belton.

She pressed her lips together and moved back to the front door. Plucking the radio out of her pocket, she pressed the talk button. "Move in. The suspect does not appear to be in the dwelling."

Kyra knocked briskly on the front door. "NOPD. Open the door."

There was a bit of shuffling before the door was thrown wide open and a twelve-gauge shotgun was brought chest level between them. "Badge."

"You are pointing an illegal weapon at an officer of the law," Kyra snapped. She held up her badge, and he slowly lowered the weapon.

"A man's got a right to defend his property."

"Not with a banned weapon." Kyra took the shotgun from him and checked its safety. "Is that your van parked in the driveway?"

"Yeah, what of it?"

"The NOPD suspects that has been used in several homicides and an abduction." She watched him dust off his shirt and rock on his feet. "I'm looking for a young man, about twenty-six, named Aaron Belton. Do you know him?"

He shrugged. "I knew a boy named that once, but he died."

"He's no more dead than you are." She wrinkled her nose in disgust and glanced briefly toward the door when Ana entered. "Call for transport. I want this asshole in custody and this place turned upside down."

* * * * *

You understand, right? He had to be sacrificed. I know that he was special to you when you were younger, but he is nothing now. Nothing but a bitter and nasty man. He is unworthy of you, unworthy of us.

I hoped she'd kill him, but she didn't. He won't talk. I know he won't because he loves you. He'll want nothing to interfere in my mission.

Chapter Seventeen

Kyra paused at the doorway of the hospital room and just stared. Marcus Waters was sitting on the end of Glory's bed with a handful of cards. Glory was sitting up with a handful of her own. The two pleasantly bickered about a bet, which she didn't want to know about.

"Hello."

They both turned to stare at her. Glory held out her hands. "Kyra!"

She walked to her friend and pulled her as close as she could. "It's so good to see you sitting up, with a full layer of cosmetics on." She brushed back Glory's hair and looked at her face. She saw the pain there, but her friend seemed to shine through.

"Aunt Clara told us you borrowed her boat." Marcus stopped collecting cards and looked at her. "You didn't catch him."

"No." Kyra focused on Glory, saw the fear she was vainly trying to push away. "Listen, I have the best cops in this city outside this room. They're both ex-Armada Marines and spend their spare time tossing trees at each other. You couldn't be safer."

Glory smiled, but tears welled up. "Okay."

"Did my grandmother show up?"

"Yes, she's responsible for the *two* layers of chemicals on my face." Glory bit down on her bottom lip. "The mayor came with her. Patted my head and hugged me like I was his kid or something."

"Though you don't choose to make the appearance, you are a powerful and wealthy woman. He'll kiss your ass for a while." Kyra sat down on the edge of the bed and threaded her fingers through Glory's. "My commander put me off the case for twelve hours."

"Good, you need the rest."

"Yeah. I'll get him."

"I know you will." She reached forward and brushed some dirt off Kyra's cheek. "Alive."

"That appears to be important to you."

"It is. A man like him wouldn't suffer enough with just a death. He needs to be in a prison. At least until some big guy named Carlo fucks him dead." She smiled. "I'm fine, you know."

"I know you think you are." Kyra looked at Marcus, who had retreated to a chair. "Where's Alex?"

"I sent him home. We're going to do shifts."

"Thank you."

"Just part of the deal."

"You get one Waters brother, you get the other?"

"Something like that," Marcus returned, amused. "At least lately; I've been away for a long time. We find we like each other now that we're older." He stood. "I'm going to go get us some food. I'll be back soon."

Kyra watched him leave and turned to Glory. "Just what did you bet that man?"

Glory waved it off and focused on Kyra. "It was sweet of him to leave so we could talk."

"He's a hard-ass, Glory."

"You should know."

Kyra laughed. "Yeah, I guess so. Can I get you anything?"

"No, Nana is going to come back tomorrow with some clothes and stuff for me. She told me I could call her that. Can you imagine?"

"Somehow, yes." Kyra cleared her throat. "I haven't gotten a look at the evidence kit that they gathered on you ... did he tattoo you?"

"Yes." Glory closed her eyes briefly as if she were trying to block that thought out. "It's on the small of my back. A beautiful butterfly, I'm told. I've already arranged to have it removed. As beautiful as they say it is, it feels ugly and horrible."

"I'll never be able to make this up to you."

"It wasn't your fault. Being your friend is the best thing in my life, and I won't have you back away from me because your job touched me. It happens. Hell, let's not forget you sported purple hair for six days three years ago because of me."

"There is a big fucking difference between purple hair and rape."

"Yes." Glory looked down to their hands. "But you saved me, and that's what counts."

"Does it?"

"It's what counts with me." She looked around the room. "He took me to the carriage house because of your mother, right?"

“Yes.” Kyra pulled her fingers free and stood from the bed. “He took a personal hit at me because he thought I wasn’t paying attention.”

“He killed a cop. That should have been more than enough to get your attention.”

“That was incidental. She got in his way.”

Glory was silent for a moment, her gaze focused on her hands. “I don’t think so.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a good people person, you know. I can read them pretty well. He doesn’t do things unplanned. He killed her because he wanted to. He took me and tried to kill me because he wanted to.” She sat up as Marcus entered. “You’d better have some food for me.”

“I wouldn’t have dared come back otherwise.” He put the bag on the end of the bed and looked at Kyra. “Hungry?”

“No.” She shook her head.

“Go get some sleep.” He motioned to Glory. “He won’t get past me or the barbarians you have at the door.”

Kyra looked at Glory; she doubted sleep was going to happen any time soon. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw her friend on that bathroom floor, naked and bleeding to death. There was no doubt in her mind that it would linger in her mind for the rest of her life.

“Well, go get some dick, then.” Glory raised an eyebrow and grinned when Kyra blushed. “I won’t have you hanging around in here. I’ll be fine. I have two big cops and this fellow here, who promised to write me a song.” She motioned toward Marcus. “I’m cool.”

Kyra walked to her and kissed her cheek softly. “You’re the best thing in my life, too.”

Glory sucked in a breath and didn’t respond until Kyra had stalked from the room, shutting the door behind her. “You know, if I were a man, she’d be in so much trouble.”

Marcus laughed aloud and dug into the bag. “French fries first?”

* * * * *

Kyra slipped past Alex and into his apartment. She unbuckled her weapons harness and pulled it off. Allowing it to dangle from her fingers, she turned to look at him. “I need a shower.”

“It so happens that I have one.” He walked to her and took the harness. Tossing it onto his couch, he pulled her T-shirt free from her jeans and up over her head. “You went to see her?”

“Yeah.” She glanced briefly in the direction that he tossed her T-shirt, then turned to walk down the hall to his bedroom. “Did I wake you?”

“No, I can’t seem to sleep.”

"I'd apologize for involving you, but it wouldn't be sincere." She sat down in a chair next to the entrance of his bedroom and quickly took off her boots. She dropped her utility tool, p-pc, and comm-u in the chair as she stood. Hesitantly, she pulled out the earpiece and dropped it on the wrist unit.

"She'll be fine. Glory is a strong and determined woman."

"Yeah, her strength continually surprises me. When I first met her, I couldn't help but think she was fragile and breakable. I kept waiting for her to bail on me. I've never been very good at female relationships. That's why up until recently all of my partners have been male."

He watched her struggle with her jeans briefly and then he went to her. Carefully, he brushed her shaking hands aside and undid the buttons. "Kyra, you're shaking."

"I can't help it."

She held onto his shoulders when he slid her jeans down, snagging her panties as he went. Numbly she lifted her feet away from the jeans. He undid her bra and pushed it off her shoulders. "Let's get you in the shower."

"Okay."

Alex followed along behind her, shedding his clothes. She was sitting on a bench in the shower bay, water streaming from all four heads. He'd never seen anyone look so defeated and lost in his entire life. He sat down beside her and drew her carefully into his arms. Kyra buried her face in the side of his neck, and tears flowed.

"It's all right." He kissed the top of her head and lifted her into his lap. There was nothing so moving or gut wrenching as a strong woman in tears.

"I've never wanted to kill anyone in my life until tonight. All of those bodies I stood over, and never once did I think I should kill the person responsible."

"Killing in the line of duty is no easy thing."

"Yeah."

"You're worried that you might go beyond the law on this one?"

"I could. I so easily could." She lifted her head, brushed away tears that still lingered on her face. "There were a few moments tonight when I could have gleefully tortured that son of a bitch to death."

"You're a better cop than that."

"I hope so." She bit down on her lip. "Glory told me to come over here and get some dick."

Alex chuckled. "She is startling at times."

Leaning in, she kissed his mouth and sighed. "I need to wash the swamp off."

He grinned. "I wasn't going to say anything."

"Asshole." She slid off his lap and went to a soap dispenser built into the wall.

Alex leaned back against the shower wall and watched her. She was in some ways an economic sort of woman. No wasted time on the shower or pausing to enjoy the texture of the sponge on her skin or the glide of soap down her body. For a woman he knew to be very sensual, he found this both surprising and fascinating.

He caught the sponge when she tossed it in his direction. Standing up from the bench, he moved to the soap dispenser and added more soap to the sponge. By the time he'd soaped down, she'd washed her hair and left the shower bay. He found her several minutes later, wrapped in a towel and sitting on the edge of the bed. Her workbag was sitting on the bed beside her, and she was running a brush through her hair.

"Feel better?"

"Yeah." She tossed the brush back into the bag and picked it up. "I think I could probably sleep."

"Good." He walked to her and took the bag. He set it in the chair next to the door and dimmed the lights. "Let's sleep."

She eyed his erection with some interest as she dropped the towel. "That's not what's on your mind."

He laughed. "Can't really control it, but we both need sleep more."

Kyra nodded and slid under the covers as he did. She didn't object when he pulled her into his arms.

Alex propped his head on his hand and watched Kyra turn in her sleep. She looked soft, even approachable. The contrast was amusing, as he knew her to be neither. Turning her head gently with the tips of his fingers, he placed a soft, barely there kiss on her lips. Her eyelids fluttered briefly before she opened them fully.

"Playing some twisted fairytale sort of game?"

He laughed. "Fairytale aren't twisted."

"The real ones were. They just cleaned them up to make money." Kyra pushed him onto his back and slid astride him. Sitting up, she pressed her ass against his growing erection and shoved her hair out of her face. "Every time I look at you, I get soaking wet."

"Was that a complaint?"

"Well, if you weren't man enough to live up to the anticipation, it would be." She looked at the clock on his nightstand. "I should go."

"You have two more hours on your mandatory break."

"Who told?"

"My brother." He sat up and wrapped his arms around her. "There is a price to be paid for sleeping in my bed."

"Oh, really?" She inclined her head and raised one sleek black eyebrow.

“Really.” He slid his hands down her back and cupped her ass. Pulling her to him, then upward and onto his cock, he held her tight to his chest. “I love how you take me.”

“Yes.” Kyra shuddered in his arms and let her head fall back. “Alex.”

“That’s it, baby, ride me.”

Rocking leisurely on the length of him, she gripped his shoulders as he lowered his head to take a nipple into his mouth. The tug of his lips on her sensitive flesh whipped through her body and made her womb throb. Had she ever known a man who turned her on more?

She lifted off his cock and slid back down with an agonizing slowness. Alex lifted his head at her change of pace and then lay back on the bed to watch. He picked up her rhythm quickly, lifting his hips to meet her downward thrusts. Six, seven times he let her take him that way, and when he could take no more, he turned them over abruptly and buried himself to the hilt inside her.

Laughing breathlessly, Kyra wrapped her arms around him and planted her feet flat on the bed. “Yes.”

“You’ll pay for that lovely bit of teasing.” He nipped her bottom lip.

“I sincerely hope so.” She hissed in a breath when he started to move.

“Hurt?” Alex asked softly.

“Yes.”

“More?”

“Please,” she whispered.

Kyra pushed upwards against him and moaned when he quickened his pace inside her. The hot invasion of his thick flesh robbed her of thought and reason so quickly that she surrendered to the assault on her senses without a single hesitation.

“Harder.”

He met the demand silently, slamming into her body with more force than finesse. She arched under him and cried out with the pleasure of it. Her pussy clenched around him as orgasm overtook her, and she rushed wet against his invasion. Alex stilled and lowered his face into the side of her neck as her cunt milked his cock.

“You’re holding back on me.” She rubbed the back of his head. “Come for me.”

He groaned and lifted his head. “I never get to take it slowly with you.”

“Later.” She touched his cheek and then bit down on her bottom lip as he started to move again. The hot sting of too much pleasure swept over her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. “Fuck me like you need to.”

Alex covered her mouth with his and thrust his tongue into her as he began to move again. Her body alternately languished in the pleasure he provided and demanded that he

give more. He jerked against her as his orgasm approached, and could only groan in approval when she wrapped herself tightly around him.

* * * * *

Ana paused at the doorway of Glory's room and watched for a moment. She was sitting up in the bed, the bandages around her arms vivid against the rest of her. Marcus Waters was asleep in a chair beside the bed next to the window. His clothes were wrinkled, and his normally neat braids were a little out of place. He looked much less dangerous that way, but then, most predatory animals could look harmless in their sleep.

"Hey."

Glory turned and smiled. "Hey, there, you must be Ana." She held out her hand and wiggled her fingers. Ana moved inside the room and shut the door. "You're just gorgeous. I bet the men fall over you."

Ana laughed. "The gun scares most of them off." She glanced at Marcus, who had sat up. "Mr. Waters."

"Constable Salanti, you sure do make that uniform look good."

Ana blushed, then looked at her shiny shoes. "Didn't the inspector tell you not to hit on me?"

"Yeah, but I don't take orders from the inspector." He stood and stretched. "If you'll stay a while, I think I'll take a walk."

"Sure." Ana watched him leave and then turned to Glory. "You know he's a hard-ass, right?"

Glory laughed and patted the bed. "You're worse than Kyra! Did she send you down?"

"No." Ana sat hesitantly on the bed. "I just needed to see you for myself."

"It must have been very difficult for you." Glory patted her hand. "Kyra is so strong and capable."

"Yes." There was nothing to do but agree, but she doubted she'd ever get rid of the picture of the two of them on that floor together, Kyra shaking with rage and fear. "I'm lucky to have her as a partner."

"So, you want to know any deep, dark secrets for blackmail purposes, I have a couple that will make her blush to the roots of her hair."

"Blush?"

"Oh, yeah." Glory nodded.

"Maybe later." Ana sucked her bottom lip into her mouth. She pulled a mini-disk out of her pocket. "This is a list of really good rape counselors in the area. I also included the name and address of a man who specializes in teaching women how to defend themselves."

Glory took the small plastic-encased disk with a steady hand. "Thank you."

"You'll need more help than anyone currently in your life can provide," Ana stated seriously. "So much more, and no matter what you've told yourself, you can't do it on your own."

"I'm not his victim."

"You are a survivor and a victim. There is nothing wrong with being both, and there is no reason to be ashamed of being his victim. No reason at all."

"Yeah." Glory looked down at the mini-disk. "The doctors have already told me that I should talk to a counselor. I don't want to do it."

"Talking to a counselor won't make it any more real than it already is. It happened, and how you choose to deal with it will define the rest of your life. You can choose to be afraid, or you can choose to be strong and fight. It's a fight that starts with talking about what happened to you and defining the terms on which you're going to live the rest of your life."

"They teach you this stuff in cop school?"

Ana laughed. "No, but they should." She looked down at their hands and cleared her throat. "I should go."

"You'll think me a coward, but will you wait until Marcus returns?"

"He's probably outside talking with the McRaine brothers."

"Are they really brothers?"

"Yes, and they really do throw trees around. Some sort of Scottish heritage festival." Ana stood and walked to the single window in the room. "You know she'll catch him."

"Yeah."

"She wants to kill him." Ana sat on the windowsill and turned to look at her. "Truthfully, I don't blame her."

"It wouldn't be justice to me, and she knows that." Glory put the mini-disk on her bed tray and sighed. "I would never want her to sacrifice her career to avenge something that can never really be avenged." She paused. "Were you raped?"

"No, but I worked sex crimes in New York for about a year before I came to New Orleans."

"Must have been hard."

"Yeah."

The door to the room opened, and Kyra walked in with a cloth bag. "Well, hello there, ladies."

Ana straightened from the window. "I thought we were going to meet at the station."

Kyra nodded. "Well, now we can meet here." She put the bag on the end of the bed and looked at Glory. "Are you all right? You're pale."

"Yeah. I'm fine." She nodded briskly and looked at the bag. "What's in the bag?"

"Some clothes." Kyra sat down on the end of the bed. "My grandmother left them at the nurse's station earlier this morning. She'll be back later."

"Just in time to quiz Alex on your relationship." Glory laughed and held her hand out for the bag. "That should be entertaining."

The door opened again, and Desi Marcos came in with a large bundle of flowers and a box on her hip. "Awesome, it's a girl party."

Glory waved her in. "Hey, flowers. I love flowers."

Desi put the vase of flowers on a small stand next to the bed and then put the box on Glory's tray table. "So, I thought if I were you, I'd be going stark raving mad without some real entertainment." Chewing her gum rapidly, she pulled out a mini-panel and a collection of disks. "I brought you a selection of chick-flick favorites, and six of the raunchiest romance novels I have on mini-disk." She set out a new p-pc, still in its packaging. "All of your content from your former device is on this disk." She waved it and put it on top of the new p-pc. "I got you the best model on the market, lots of space, and lots of power. You can contact the moon with that baby."

Glory reached out and touched the box. "Thanks." She looked at her. "Who are you?"

Desi laughed and held out her hand. "Dr. Desdemona Kane Marcos. I work with the inspector."

"Cool name."

"Thanks. Everyone but the inspector calls me Desi." She shook Glory's hand and met her gaze squarely. "You did a very gutsy thing. I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Who does your hair?"

Desi patted the top of her head as if trying to remember who'd given her the blue braids she was currently sporting. "Ah, my sister did this."

"Nice. Does she need a job?"

"Does she ever," Desi muttered and rolled her eyes. "Don't get me started."

"We don't have time for you to get started." Kyra checked her comm-u for the time. "I'll meet you guys in my vehicle." Desi and Ana waved to Glory and exited the room, pulling the door shut behind them.

Kyra looked over the myriad of things Desi had in the box and laughed. "Well, she has you set up."

Glory nodded, her hand lingering on the new p-pc device. "I didn't know if I was going to be able to carry the other one. It's odd that it should remind me of what he did to me."

"I'm sorry that it didn't occur to me."

"It's a silly thing, anyway."

"What did Ana want?"

"She came by to see me and to give me information on rape counselors in the area."

Kyra swallowed hard and looked toward the window. “Do you think you need that?”

“She seemed pretty knowledgeable on the subject. I’m going to give it a try. It can’t hurt.”

“No, it certainly can’t.” Kyra walked to her and pressed her lips to Glory’s forehead. “I got the dick you ordered. It was so fine.”

Glory laughed and pulled Kyra in for a hug.

Chapter Eighteen

Kyra settled into the driver's seat and fussed with her harness. "Okay, I'm not good with this stuff, so I just want to say thanks to you both."

"She's important to you," Ana stated simply. She flipped down the workstation hidden in the dash and set her p-pc down. "Desi has almost finished mapping the route Aaron took from your grandmother's house."

"Yeah, I had to do a little adjustment."

Kyra looked in the back seat and found Desi with a pull-down workstation full of the pieces of what used to be a p-pc. "Glory's old one?"

"Yeah, I figure it'll never be the same after I get it back together."

"It was a good thought to get her a new one. Put in a voucher to be reimbursed."

Desi grinned. "I put it on your expense account, but the flowers I bought myself."

"That works." Kyra started the vehicle and disengaged the charger from the ground outlet. The onboard computer logged the charge and the cost on the view screen, then released the vehicle to Kyra's control. "Three hundred credits." She glowered at the screen.

"That's what you get for driving this energy hog. You have three on-board batteries, right?"

"Yeah." Kyra glared at Desi through the rearview mirror. "I love this vehicle."

"It isn't like the department doesn't give you an energy allowance." Desi shrugged.

"That's beside the point."

"You have an operations meeting at the station in an hour." Ana focused on the schedule. "Am I supposed to keep track of this stuff?"

Kyra laughed. "No, actually, I'm supposed to have an administrative assistant for that. I just haven't had time to interview for one since the last one quit."

"I heard you fired him," Ana said softly.

"I gave him a choice."

"Die or quit?" Desi asked from the backseat.

"All those under five-foot-six and sitting in the backseat are grounded for being a smart-ass."

"I may be little, but I'm sturdy," Desi muttered. "Sturdy and brilliant."

Kyra laughed, then sobered as she focused on the road. Traffic was light, which was sort of discomfiting because it never was, normally. "Do you think she needs to see a counselor? She is strong; growing up without parents does that to you."

"Victims of violent crimes benefit from counseling. The research is sound in that area. No person responds the exact same way, but no one can question the benefit of having someone to talk to who isn't going to tell anyone and who isn't going to sit in judgment of you."

"Yeah." Kyra nodded.

* * * * *

The Major Crimes Unit for District 4 worked thirty detectives and eighty street cops. Kyra stood silently in front of the room until they all found a seat. It didn't take long; there was no horsing around on a day like this one. She started to speak, but paused when the door opened and Inspector Liz Givens urged the entire Anti-Crimes squad into the room. She watched in silence as the twenty-five additional people settled into seats or lined up against the wall.

"Good morning." One hundred and thirty-five heads nodded in response. "We're going to skip the crap I usually make you guys sit through. All of you are familiar with the case that I'm working and the task force that's in place. While I consider the Waterman a serious threat, he is by no means the only threat we have in the city. Those of you who have been pulled into the case will report to conference room six for further instructions in twenty minutes. We have forty-two open homicides, two unsolved arson cases, and a myriad of terror alerts, and every one of them is just as important as the Waterman case. I realize that a lot of you would like to take part in the investigation, to help in some way because he took down a fellow officer."

She watched the people in the room and saw their agreement and frustration. "Most of you may know that his last intended victim is a close personal friend of mine." She paused. "HisHis personal interest in me and his knowledge of my past is an issue of some concern for the commander and the police commissioner. At this point, however, the case has not been removed from our unit." A few bodies relaxed. "I would ask that all beat cops pick up copies of the drawings and pictures we have of the suspect, and canvass your neighborhoods. He has to eat and live somewhere."

"You think he's in the city?"

"I think we can leave no avenue unexplored." She rolled her head on her shoulders. "Now, I have a witness to harass the hell out of, and a psycho to stomp on. Anyone got any pressing matters?"

Kyra watched Orland Frees moving around the interrogation room with cool eyes. He was dressed in a pair of blue pants and a white T-shirt, both jail issue. She imagined he'd been hosed down fairly good the night before, which was a relief because his smell had lingered with her for a long time. Sipping coffee, she was silent while the rest of the team discussed what Orland could have to offer.

"Where is the background check on him?"

"I hit a federal block." Desi paused beside Kyra and shrugged. "I'm working it, but I'll probably need another couple of hours."

Kyra nodded. "Okay."

"How are you going to play this?" Liz asked.

Kyra looked at her and the rest of the task force. "I thought I'd start with crime scene images and work my way up to the autopsy record." She looked around the room. "Detective Jennings, you're with me."

He raised an eyebrow. "Really."

"Oh, yes." Kyra nodded sharply. "You get to stand by the door and look like a really bad cop with a need to beat a couple hundred pounds off Orland Frees's ass."

"I love being the bad cop." He rubbed his hands together. "What are you going to be?"

"Queen bitch of the known universe."

"I'm loving it."

Kyra looked at Ana. "You are going to give a press conference in ten minutes."

"Me?" Ana's eyes grew wide. "Are you serious?"

"When did everyone decide it was okay to question my orders?" Kyra demanded of the room in general. "You'll give a brief statement to the press about the ongoing progress of the case. You'll answer no questions pertaining to Ms. James. Be ambiguous, serious, and unimpressed and trite when referring to the killer. Remind the public of the tattoos and the artist drawings, and take two uniforms with you so your exit from the room will be unmolested."

"Got it." Ana swallowed hard as Kyra stalked from the room. "Oh, my God."

Desi patted her on the back. "Come on, I'll help you get your statement ready."

"I can't believe I have to do this."

Liz chuckled. "It's actually quite smart."

Ana turned to look at her. "What?"

“He tried to kill her best friend last night. He expects to see her on every vid-station in the tri-state area, bright-eyed and furious. But, instead, he’ll get you. Serious, cool, and so very proper. No temper, no pain lingering in her eyes. You go up there and do her proud.”

“I will.” Ana looked at Desi. “Get your badge out. I want you to stand up there behind me in case I pass out or something.”

Liz nodded to two of her detectives. “You go along with Constable Salanti and make sure the press stays in their place.”

The two men followed Ana and Desi out.

Liz turned and looked at Kyra, who leaned against the wall next to the one-way mirror in the interview room. She pushed the button on the remote control that dropped a large vid-panel down the wall across from the prisoner’s position in the room.

“Mr. Frees, we’re going to be viewing some pictures. It is your job, as the fine upstanding citizen you are, to look at these pictures and answer my questions.”

“Whatever.” He crossed his arms on his chest and glared at the screen, his jaw tight with determination.

The first image was of Donna LaRoux. Spread-eagled and exposed before the world, her skin already starting to turn. It was a vivid and beautifully produced image. “This is Donna LaRoux. Aaron Belton poisoned her, drowned her, cut off her skin, and then dumped her naked in the alley behind the restaurant she worked in.”

“Don’t know her.”

“But you do know Aaron Belton.”

“Aaron Belton died when he was six years old.”

Kyra flipped to the next picture of Donna. “This is Donna’s lungs full of bayou water.”

Orland sat up straighter in his chair. “I don’t need to see this shit.”

“Her name was Donna LaRoux,” Kyra snapped.

* * * * *

Ana was calm, cool, and going to throw up any second. She paused at the podium, trying to remember how Kyra had stood the last time she spoke to the press. “Good morning. I am Constable Anastasia Salanti, and I have a brief statement. At this time, the killer who has called himself the Waterman is still at large. The NOPD is confident that he will be brought to justice. There is no new information to give to the public. We ask the media to continue publishing the images of the tattoo and the pictures of the suspect.

“I will now take a limited number of questions.” She let her gaze move around the room. “Yes, the gentlemen in the red.”

“Nathan Meaton, *New Orleans Times*.” He smoothed the lapel of his suit jacket and offered her a smile. “Can you tell us the circumstances that caused Ms. Glory James to be hospitalized and placed under the care of the NOPD?”

“No, that information is confidential.” Her gaze moved around the room as she wondered who would ask the right question. She spotted the woman from Channel 4 and was pleased that she remembered the woman’s first name. “Joanna.”

Joanna smiled and moved slightly so her cameraman had a good view of Ana. “Where is Inspector Moray this morning?”

“She is currently working on administrative tasks and following up leads on several ongoing cases.” She paused and looked around the room. Who was going to ask the right question about the Waterman? She caught sight of a CNN camera in the back of room and swallowed hard. Christ, where had they come from? “Yes, the gentleman from CNN.”

“Scott Fitzgerald.” He paused, letting his name saturate his audience at home. “The NOPD has not been very forthcoming about the details of this investigation ...” He let the words linger. Scott was very good at what he did. “Who is the Waterman?”

“Well, as you can imagine, the Waterman case has spawned a lot of interest in many different areas. We have an FBI profiler on his way to join our task force. We’ve made great strides in evidence-gathering and feel confident that once we get our hands on the individual, we will have no problems making sure he spends the rest of his life in prison. He has left a trail of forensic evidence two miles wide, and it’s very compelling.”

“Are you afraid? He’s already killed one cop,” Scott pressed.

“No, he’s nothing to be afraid of. He’s a thoughtless, amoral man. He’s not a monster or specter lurking in the dark corners of this city. I suggest the public be leery of strangers and think smart if they identify him through the pictures we’ve provided.” She checked her comm-u. “One more question.”

Joanna struck fast. “I have a source that claims Glory James was raped and nearly killed by the Waterman. Any comment?”

Ana pinned her with a cool look. “I believe I’ve already indicated that the department will not answer any questions in reference to Ms. James.” She looked around the room. “Anyone want to ask a question that I can answer?”

“What has the FBI profiler said about the killer?”

She nodded and glanced down at the folder in front of her on the podium. “The profile indicates that the killer is a young man between twenty and thirty. He’s a white male from a severely dysfunctional family, little to no formal education. He has a history of violence against women, is disdainful of life, is likely impotent, and has never had a serious or lasting relationship with a woman other than his mother.”

“Is that pity, Constable?”

"Pity is a far more appropriate response than fear." Ana picked up the empty folder she'd brought in with her. "Good day."

She left the podium and kept her back rigid as she strode from the room.

"You did awesome," Desi assured her as she hurried down the hall beside Ana.

"I haven't come that close to throwing up since my first year in the academy," Ana snapped as she shoved into a large bathroom and hoped she hadn't entered the men's room. She went to the sink and turned on the water. "It was okay?"

"It was great."

"Okay, let's get back downstairs and watch the inspector destroy Orland Frees."

"You see, Orland, after he realized that Stacey had removed her tattoo, he became enraged. You'll note the bruising and mutilation of her body is quite extensive." Kyra took a deep drink of water from the bottle she'd picked up. "He, of course, took the time before he beat her to death to put his work back on her and then remove it. Aaron is certainly a creature of some habit."

"I want a lawyer."

She looked at him and smiled. "You aren't under arrest, Orland. You don't have the right to an advocate."

"You can't keep me like this."

"Actually, I can keep you for seventy-two hours. You are allowed a two-hour break every eight hours." She checked her comm-u for the time. "And six hours of sleep after eighteen hours. You aren't due for a break, but I can give you a meal and something to drink."

"I haven't done anything."

"You threatened an officer of the law with a banned weapon."

"Which you haven't charged me with."

"Oh, we'll get there." Kyra moved away from the wall and pointed her remote to the screen. "Aaron Belton is alive. You've been harboring him and aiding him. He's been killing women, Orland. He used your van to abduct and kill women."

Leaning down close to his face, she spoke again. "The first time he came home giddy with the pleasure of killing a woman, you knew what he'd done. He probably even told you about it, showed you his trophy."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The lock for his skinning shack was registered under a false name, but you've been paying the hunting taxes on it." She sniffed delicately. "You're sweating, Orland. Do I make you nervous?"

"Got no to reason to be nervous. You're just a bitch cop."

"Did you hear that, Detective Jennings? Orland thinks I'm a bitch cop."

"It appears that your reputation is starting to precede you," Ryan responded.

Kyra sat down at the table and stared at Orland for several seconds. "We've been going over that shack. If I find your prints in there, you're going to go down with him. I'll charge you as an accessory for each offense."

"Aaron Belton is dead."

"Are you afraid of Aaron, Orland? You should be. He's a complete psycho. He'd sooner kill you than not. Only reason he hasn't is that he finds you useful. What happens when you're no longer useful?"

"You got it all wrong! You think you know? You don't fucking know anything."

Kyra stood abruptly. "Jennings, you'll stand watch over Orland here. I need a little break."

"Works for me."

"Don't leave any marks on him," Kyra snapped over her shoulder as she left the room.

Leaning against the wall outside of the interrogation room, Kyra went over the steps in her head. How they had come to believe that the man they wanted was a dead child named Aaron Belton? The observation room opened and Ana came out.

"The background on Orland?"

"Desi is still working it." Ana looked toward the room. "Are you going back in there?"

"Yeah, after I know a little more."

* * * * *

The FBI profiler, Frederick Lehman, was a thin, wiry man. He was sitting at her desk when she entered. "Agent Lehman, get the hell out of my chair."

He stood and smiled. "Inspector Moray, I've heard a great deal about you."

She watched him wearily as he moved over to Desi's station and sat down. "Yes, I imagine you have. The deputy mayor met with you just after you landed?"

"Oh, yes, he's displeased with you."

"He's a politician." Kyra said "politician" like some people would say "pervert." The distinction wasn't missed on Agent Lehman. "No matter what instructions he might have given you, this is my case, and you are here in a strictly advisory position."

"I have no interest in taking over the case. I think you're doing an exceptional job, and I told the deputy mayor so."

"Oh, so he's displeased with you, as well?"

"Yes." He inclined his head. "You should be careful. He could make your career difficult."

“He should be careful. She could make his life difficult.”

They both turned to watch Ana enter the room and close the door. “Desi is on her way up.” She cast the agent a look as she scooted into her own station. “She’s got something exciting to report from the CSU team.”

Desi threw open the door with her usual flare, glared briefly at Lehman for sitting in her chair, and focused on Kyra. “We found two sets of prints in the shack. Orland Frees and the same unidentified set of prints that we pulled off Stacey Valteau’s body.”

“The check on Orland Frees?”

“He has a nearly perfect history. School, military service, and the like all neatly in place. He even draws a check from the government.”

Kyra inclined her head. “But?”

“So, I’m looking at this file and I’m thinking ... no one is that perfect. No life plays out like that. It just reads like pure fiction.”

“And was it?”

“I’m still working on it. If it is a hack job, it’s a damn good one.” She walked toward her desk and smiled obligingly when Lehman got up. “I’ll have the inspector’s administrative assistant prepare you an office for your use while you’re here, Agent.”

“I don’t have an administrative assistant.”

“Sure you do.” Desi sat back in her chair. “Hired him myself this morning.”

“You hired me an administrative assistant?” Kyra blinked.

“Yeah. I’m not going to get stuck doing your paperwork.” She captured her bottom lip between her teeth as she started working at her computer. “He’s pretty, too.”

“His name?”

“Abel Joshua, and he’s perfect for the job. I feel like I’ve really created a beautiful working relationship for you,” Desi announced as the door opened, and a young man who could only be Abel Joshua walked in.

He was dressed in leather pants, a tight red tank top that showed off a well-developed chest and a tightly muscled stomach, and boots similar to Kyra’s strapped halfway up his calves. Four hoops looped above his left eye, and shocking white-blond hair fell down his back to his waist. Strictly speaking, he had a beautiful face and the bright gold complexion of an interracial child. His eyes, probably altered, were black. He set a steaming cup of dark liquid in front of Kyra and glanced around the room before he took a parade-rest position that was all military.

Kyra leaned back in her chair and observed him. “I bite.”

He smiled. “I have all of my shots, Inspector.” He eyed her. “Due to your current workflow, I’ve cleared six meetings that you would have ignored off of your schedule, moved your annual physical exam to next month, and paid all of your overdue bills.” He put two

soft compu-pads on her desk. "You were fairly close to being evicted. Since I'd prefer not work for a homeless woman, I've set up automatic payment on your standard expenses."

Kyra glanced briefly at the compu-pads; the slim computerized notepads were often used for entering reports and internal office schedules. "Can I trust you, Abel?"

"As much as you trust anyone," Abel answered automatically.

"How do I like my coffee?"

"When you can't get chocolate espresso with a double shot of caffeine, you'll drink coffee in which you take three creams and four sugars."

"Some believe I killed my last assistant."

"He must have been a real pansy," Abel responded. "And he was messy; so was the woman you had before him. Your files are an abomination, and you haven't filed a single formal transcript for a case in six months. Once you get off your ass and catch the serial killer, you'll be spending a lot of time catching up."

"That's what you are for."

"I can't input and file what you haven't dictated."

Kyra opened a drawer on her desk and pulled out a large box. "Seventy-two closed cases in the last six months. My oral reports are filed by case number and date on mini-disk in this box. You make this box empty in the next month, keep up with me in my current cases, and you can keep the job your sister wrangled you."

Abel glanced at Desi, who was staring at Kyra. "Sure." He snagged the box and strolled out.

"How did you know?"

"You wouldn't have a desk in my office if I didn't know all I need to know about you, Dr. Marcos." Kyra turned back to her own computer and chuckled. "And he's very pretty."

"Yeah, my mom got real lucky with her second marriage. I got a great stepfather and a kid brother, and she got the love of her life." Desi leaned on her hand and looked at Kyra. "Speaking of love?"

Kyra held up a hand. "No more."

"You look very well rested."

"I slept like a stone."

"I'm sure you did." Ana went to her desk and picked up one of the compu-pads that Abel had left behind. "He's really good."

"Positions like his are designed to keep investigating officers on the right path despite themselves." Kyra picked up her p-pc and noted with some small amount of admiration that her calendar had been updated. "He does realize that he'll work in the field on occasion?"

"Yeah, I told him he might have to. He served in the Air Force for a five-year stint. He'll keep up with you." Desi paused as she worked, then cleared her throat. "Okay, wow,

I've just hit a federal seal." She looked toward Agent Lehman, who had retreated to Kyra's sleeping cot and was knee-deep in his own compu-station. "A federal privacy seal."

He put aside his compu and stood. "My clearance is pretty high, but it may not be high enough. What's this for?"

"I'm running a background check on Orland Frees."

He leaned over and put in his credentials. "I expect good behavior, doctor."

Desi grinned as he walked away. "When I'm bad, I don't get caught." She was silent for a few minutes before she spoke softly. "Orland Frees was in the New South Militia. In fact, he *was* the New South Militia. He turned on his members and turned several of the more radical of them in to the government for immunity."

"Shit, that's why his name was so familiar." Kyra stood and went to the window. "That's going to make things interesting around here pretty soon." She looked at Agent Lehman. "Don't you think?"

Lehman shrugged. "I'm going to start work on the killer's diary. I'll get with your admin about some space."

Kyra entered the interrogation room and jerked her head at Jennings. He left the room without a backward glance at his prisoner. "We found your prints in the shack Aaron was using for his trophy room."

"Aaron is dead!" He started to stand but retreated to his chair when he saw her face. "He's dead."

"You led the New South Militia?" She laughed. "I can't picture a weak-willed fool like you leading a group of school kids across the street, much less being the head of a large antigovernment organization like NSM. They were the single biggest threat the new government faced during that time of internal strife."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure, I do. It's all in your FBI file." She paused and looked at him.

"I have rights. I want an advocate."

Chapter Nineteen

“You don’t think he’s Orland Frees?”

“I don’t know who he is.” Kyra watched the med-tech drawing Orland’s blood. “Desi, get with Jeffrey. I want to know how his DNA relates to the killer’s. Ana, get Billy Joe down here.”

“Another official transport?”

“No, call him and ask him to come in. Tell him to bring that vest and charge my account.”

“Making an apology?” Liz asked from the doorway of the observation deck.

“In a way he’ll appreciate. It’s better than a bribe; his wife does the tooling work in his shop.”

“There’s a visitor in your office.”

“Oh, yeah?” Kyra checked the time and sighed. “I was going to go have lunch.”

“I think the visitor in your office has to seen to that.” Liz couldn’t keep the amusement from her voice.

Kyra left the observation deck and walked down the hall to Major Crimes. Several detectives were taking lunch at their desks, and comm-u stations were steadily buzzing. Her office door was open, and when she walked in, she found Alex at her desk passing out food to Ana and Desi. “Well, I hope you saved me some.”

“Your grandmother sent me.” He leaned on the desk. “I won’t repeat what she said, but the gist was that you needed food, too.”

She walked past him and let her hand run along his arm. It was the only touch she was going to allow herself. Taking the box of food he offered, she looked him over. “You left Glory with my grandmother?”

“Yeah. It was every man for himself at that point. I told Mrs. Moray to call me when she was ready to leave, so I could come back and keep Glory company.”

He left the edge of her desk where he'd been leaning, went to the large window behind her, and then walked around to peer at Desi's compu-station. “Nice.”

“Yeah, I had to beg real pretty for it.” She stroked the lines of the portable unit with gentle fingers. “This is almost as good as a man.”

Alex laughed. “You need to get out more.”

“Yeah.” Desi sighed as she considered it. “So many men and so little time.”

Kyra cleared her throat and stood. “How about I walk you out?”

He grinned. “Sure.”

Kyra shoved her hands into her pockets and cast Ana a glare because she was grinning like a very pleased cat. The detective's area was silent as Kyra and Alex strode through. She pushed the button for the elevator and held up her hand at Abel as he strode up next to her. “No time.”

“Your warrant for Mr. Frees's DNA sample has been validated.”

Since she'd already had blood taken from him, it was good to know. “Good.”

“You have a meeting with the commander and the mayor in twenty minutes.”

She turned and looked at him as the elevator doors opened. “Why don't you go sit at your desk and look pretty?”

“Man, why can't I have a man like that?” Desi shook her head. “I could use that sort of distraction. I really could.”

“We can't all be that fortunate.” Ana turned in her chair and sighed. “His brother is just as fine.”

“Yeah, I have his albums.” Desi ran her tongue along her teeth and nodded. “I could hurt him.”

The office door opened, and Kyra stalked toward her desk. “How the hell am I supposed to be able to think with him around?” She slumped into her chair and stared at her desk for a moment. “Blood results?”

“CSU has confirmed that Orland is not a match for the DNA found on Stacey Valteau. Also, he isn't related to the individual who left his DNA on the victim.”

She glanced from her food to her comm-u. “I have to go upstairs and make nice with the mayor.” Grimacing, she picked up her p-pc and trudged toward the door. At the entryway, she glanced at Abel. “You're with me.”

He shot up, a soft pad in hand, and fell into step beside her. “Did you need me to take notes?”

“No, mostly I just want to you there to distract the mayor.”

He laughed. "Not a problem."

"Your sister is a valuable member of this department. A lot of people respect her for both her work ethic and her dedication to a job that she is profoundly overqualified for."

"I know."

"You'd better not embarrass her."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Good." She pushed open the door that led to the stairs. "I love the hair, the clothes, but the brow rings will have to go. They make you vulnerable to attack."

"I can take care of myself."

"I get that. Still, you don't want some hotshot perp to take a swipe at you and take those hoops with him. It would really ruin your pretty face."

"Okay."

"I also get that after years of military service where everyone looked the same, you want to look different." She pushed open the door to the fourth floor. "The hair is an exceptional touch."

"Women seem to like it."

"No doubt." She checked her weapon harness and grimaced. "I hate these sorts of meetings."

"I would think the mayor would be enamored with you. After all, you *did* take a bullet for him."

"She was wearing a vest."

Kyra groaned aloud and turned to look down the hall. The deputy mayor was sitting on a bench just down from her commander's office. "Don't you have some other city employee to harass?"

"Actually, no." He stood and dusted off his pants. "The mayor requested my input."

"Have you ever taken a bullet with a vest on?" Abel asked Deller softly.

Both turned to look at Abel, who was staring intently at Deller. "No."

"So, what you're saying is that it was no big deal to stand in front of a man with an RPG Ranger weapon that expels an electrically charged bullet at eight thousand feet per second. That if you'd been wearing a vest, you would have done it instead of cowering behind the mayor and, in turn, Inspector Moray like a twelve-year-old girl?"

Deller's face went red and he turned to Kyra. "Who the hell is this?"

"He's mine, and none of your business." She smiled. "After you, Mr. Deller."

The mayor was sitting in a chair in front of the commander's desk, and they both looked tense and sad. That wasn't a comforting image. She preferred to see the commander righteous and the mayor fumbling. Seeing them off stride reminded her that the case wasn't just her case.

She sat down and watched Abel pull a chair slightly back from her and sit as well, indicating that he wasn't a participating member of the meeting. She heard the telltale click of his recorder engaging.

"Our operation last night was less than successful."

"You were fortunate to have a proactive victim who thought smart and tried." The commander cleared his throat. "How is Ms. James?"

"As well as can be expected. I'm sure you have a copy of her medical exam. We were able to gather DNA from her rape kit and now know without a doubt that Stacey Valteau is a victim of the Waterman."

"Good." Ethan nodded. "I want a tight and concise case against him once we get him into custody."

"If she ever manages to get him into custody."

Kyra flinched and glanced just once at Deller. He brought out the worst in her, and she was determined this time around not to lose her cool. "When I catch Aaron Belton, the case will be impeccable and unbeatable."

"I realize that you are doing your level best to capture this killer, and the recent development will only fuel that effort." The mayor put his hands together. "What can the mayor's office do to help you, Inspector?"

"We have a good and cooperative police force in the city. All districts are circulating the available pictures of the killer and actively looking for him. We couldn't hope for more. While I fully agree that we don't want the people of New Orleans afraid, it would be good if the people heard from your office on the matter of the killer."

"The mayor is not going to ..." Deller began, only to be cut off by the mayor's raised hand.

"What should I say?"

"You can get the information we're releasing to the public through our press office," Baker said. "It would be best if we all basically said the same thing. A united front will look better for the people." He looked at Abel, then raised an eyebrow at Kyra.

"This is Abel Joshua, my admin."

Baker nodded. "Good. You need one." He glanced once more at Abel and then looked at Deller. "Lloyd, you look like you're going to burst."

"Her personal interest in the case should warrant her removal."

"What exactly is your problem with Inspector Moray?" Commander Baker demanded coolly. "She has served this city with distinction since the day she was issued a badge. Her record is clean and her work above reproach."

"She's arrogant and presents an inappropriate image for the city of New Orleans." Deller brushed imaginary dust of his suit jacket as he looked at her, disapproval and disgust evident on his face.

Kyra shrugged when her commander looked at her. "I am arrogant."

"Mr. Deller, I'm at a loss as to the inappropriate image that the inspector is presenting. She's a top-notch investigator."

"Everyone knows she's a lesbian."

The commander's mouth dropped open briefly as he looked at Kyra, who was staring at Deller with murder in her eye. "Inspector Moray's sexual preferences are none of your business and have no bearing on the performance of her job."

"She's a prime example of the moral degradation of this city, and celebrating her exploits is obscene," Deller persisted.

Lloyd Deller was a member of the Moral Majority. It was a well-known and ridiculous organization dedicated to destroying the sexual rights of everyone in America who wasn't heterosexual and dating a member of their own race. They wanted a country full of people who didn't drink, didn't fuck, and didn't even think about doing either. It had been, in fact, his membership in the organization that got him the job. The mayor had been trying to secure the vote of the backward and uneducated. It had worked.

"Actually, Mr. Deller, I'm not homosexual." She leaned back in her chair. "I'm having a flaming sexual affair with a black man who owns a bar in the Quarter. However, if it would make you feel better, I can speak with my lover; we might be able to mix a woman into our future sexual adventures." She stood and looked at Abel, who also stood. "Good afternoon."

Abel was silent as they walked toward the stairs, and blew air out as he opened the door. "The flaming part was a stroke of genius."

"You keep that bastard away from me."

"Yes, ma'am."

Kyra allowed herself the simple pleasure of muttering under her breath and stomping as she moved down to the first floor of the building. "I can't believe people like that still exist. He's a caveman."

"Society has come a long way. At least marriage between homosexuals is a right guaranteed and protected by the Constitution. You know it didn't use to be."

"We eradicated AIDS, influenza, and Ebola, but we can't get rid of the idiots?" Kyra summed up as she opened the door.

"Pretty much." Abel grinned. "Still, there is hope."

"It makes me regret anti-aging vaccines. Not only will those idiots live longer, but I'll live long enough to see their grandchildren spawn."

"That's modern advancement for you."

“Yeah.” Kyra grunted and exited the stairwell. Some modern advancement, her vehicle didn’t even come with a hover system as a standard feature. “Do some research and find a hover system that will support my vehicle.”

“Sure thing. Got a preference?”

“Yeah, I want to be able to ride around like a bat out of hell.”

Billy Joe was in her office when they returned. A plastic bag from his shop was in the middle of her desk. “Hope you didn’t expect me to gift wrap it.”

Kyra chuckled and sat down at her desk. She motioned to a guest chair that she knew hadn’t been there when she’d left for her meeting. “Take a seat.”

“I guess I’m stepping up in the eyes of the NOPD if I don’t have to sit in an interrogation room.” Billy Joe sat down and looked at her expectantly. “My wife is chomping at the bit to know why I’m spending so much time down here.”

“There is no reason to lie.”

“She don’t know about the NSM.” He crossed his arms over the chest. “Well, she don’t know I belonged to it. My Elaine is plenty opinionated about people who don’t work to make change. Thinks all those antigovernment groups were counterproductive. I can’t have her thinking I’m counterproductive.”

“That would be a shame.” Kyra put the vest into a desk drawer and met his gaze. “I’ll wear the leather for my next press conference. Maybe she’ll forget about you coming down here so much.”

“Maybe.”

“Orland Frees.”

Billy Joe whistled. “Now ain’t that a name from long ago.”

“Tell me about him.”

“He was a dynamic and passionate man when he was young.”

“He led the NSM,” Kyra prompted

“Yes, founded it, led it, and eventually saw the end of it. He turned about twenty members over to the government for terrorist acts shortly after I left.”

“You were never involved in the movement’s more violent activities?”

“Lord, no. Didn’t know enough about weapons and bombs to suit them. Which was just fine with me. Didn’t want any part in killing someone.”

“Would you know him if you saw him?”

“Think so.”

She stood and jerked her head at Ana, who hopped up. “Let’s take a walk, shall we?”

“He ain’t gonna see me, right?”

“Right.” Kyra led Billy Joe into the observation deck. Orland was sitting at the table in the interrogation room, eating. “Is that Orland Frees?”

Billy was silent for a minute. “Yeah, yeah. That’s him.”

“What was Orland Frees’s relationship with the Belton family?”

“Well, now, it would depend on who was saying it.” Billy Joe rocked on his feet. “Jake and Orland were friends for a long time, but then shortly before Orland turned all those boys into the FBI, they had a big fight. Don’t know what over, but most assumed it was over Nera.”

“Jake’s wife.”

“Yeah, Orland had himself quite a boner for Nera Belton.”

Kyra laughed and bit down on her lip when Billy Joe blushed.

“Didn’t mean to say that.” He pursed his lips and looked pointedly at Orland.

“It’s all right. I’ve certainly heard worse. Did Nera return this attraction?”

“Sure enough. He might not be much to look at now, but twenty years ago he turned a woman’s head when he wanted.” Billy Joe moved closer to the window. “Jake was a whoring son of a bitch, as you know. I wouldn’t be surprised if Orland didn’t manage to do a lot more than just turn Nera’s head. A woman like that would want some sort of revenge.”

“Would you have said that Orland was in love with Nera?”

“‘Obsessed’ would be the word.”

“Obsessed enough to help her hide after she murdered her husband?”

“Sure, he might have even helped, given the chance.”

Kyra nodded and turned to Ana. “Constable Salanti will see you out. Thank you.”

“No problem.”

If Orland Frees had been involved with Nera Belton, it made sense that he would protect her son. She left the observation deck and went into the interrogation room as a uniformed officer removed Orland’s meal.

Kyra sat down and set her p-pc on the table in front of her. The results from their first session were in, and as she’d known already, the techs monitoring his physical responses believed him to be lying about his knowledge concerning Aaron Belton.

“You should know that the technicians assigned to monitoring you during our questioning have made several definite determinations.”

“So?”

“You’re lying to me. I’ve added to appropriate charges to your file.”

“Only lies pertaining to my own crime can be held against me.”

“You know that Aaron Belton is alive. You harbored him as a child and continue to aid him as an adult. Your prints are all over his shack and the trophies he took. I’ve tested your

DNA, and you aren't related to him, so I'm left wondering why you'd help him. Were you fucking his mother or his father?"

"I want a lawyer."

"You're certainly going to need one." Kyra stood. "I'll send in a processing team to read the charges to you. You'd best pay attention. It's not every day that a man is charged with serial sexual homicide."

"I ain't got nothing to do with killing those women!"

"That's not how I see it. That's not how the DA will see it."

"Why not confront him with what you know about his relationship with Nera?" Ana watched through the observation window as Orland was processed.

Kyra shook her head. "A man like him wants to be the one to give the information. Right now, he's pulling at threads trying to find a way out of this mess. As soon as he realizes that my way is the only way out, he'll tell me everything I want to know."

"We still haven't gotten a hit on the last tattoo. He made a transmission to the state office of the FBI."

"He thinks they'll protect him, and they might try. After all, he was the star witness in one of their biggest prosecution cases in the antigovernment movement. He helped them make a mighty and righteous statement."

"And if they try?"

"I'd love to chew on an FBI agent."

"Looks like you have your chance."

Kyra glanced over her shoulder and sighed. "Lehman."

"My superior wants you to release Orland Frees to me for transfer to Arlington." Agent Lehman shut the door to the observation deck and waited for the world to explode.

"Not in a million years," Kyra responded dryly.

"I told him so."

"Tell him I said so." She looked back to her only connection with Aaron Belton and nodded grimly. "They don't get him until I get Aaron."

"You might get some heat," Lehman warned.

"They don't want to mess with me."

"They might not want to, but they will. The FBI made Orland Frees a national hero during that trial. The Bureau won't look kindly on you sullyng that by connecting him with a serial killer."

"The Bureau can take that up with Orland," Kyra snapped.

Chapter Twenty

“I shouldn’t be out like this with you.”

Samuel smiled. “I know you don’t believe that crap from the news. It’s a mistake, you’ll see.” He tugged on her hand, and she glanced over her shoulder.

“Okay, but just a few minutes. Then I have to get back to work.” She released the door and the locks clicked soundly. “I have a lot of transactions to process.”

“Don’t worry about them.”

* * * * *

Willa Rose was dead. She’d been foolish, and no one would say otherwise. It was a poor way to be remembered, but it was the way she’d be viewed. Kyra pushed blonde hair from Willa’s face with a gloved hand. “She looks a great deal like Donna LaRoux.”

“Yeah.” Ana nodded sadly.

“Christ.” Kyra stood and left the body. “The stupid girl! She fucking saw it on the panel every day this week.”

“He must have had a serious hold on her. She believed him when he said that he wasn’t who the cops were looking for.” Ana turned to look at the body. “He left the tattoo.”

“He lost the rest of his collection,” Kyra responded neutrally. She looked toward the CSU vehicle, where Desi was. Calming herself down, she walked to the vehicle and leaned in the window. “Any luck on the comm-u signal?”

“No, he’s done some serious work on the connection, and the locator GPS chip was removed shortly after he took Glory.” Desi shoved the stylus for her soft pad into the bun on top of her head and pulled up another window. “He’s got the signal bouncing off the moon. Serious smarts in the tech department, all part and parcel of the psycho mentality.”

“Yeah.” Kyra glanced at the body. “He studied long and hard for this gig. He knew exactly what he wanted to do and what he would need to know to do it.”

“He’s left evidence behind,” Desi reminded.

“When he’s finished, he won’t care if he gets caught.” Kyra pushed away from the vehicle when her comm-u signaled. She manually engaged it and grimaced when her commander’s name was announced. “Sir.”

“I have two agents from Arlington down here demanding Frees.”

“I have all the probable cause I need to hold Orland Frees.”

“So they’ve been informed.”

“They can’t have him.”

“The lead agent wants a discussion with you. You are expected in my office in the next twenty minutes.”

“I’m in the Quarter working another body.” Kyra grimaced at his intake of breath. “She’s seventeen, working as an intern in a bank handling e-transfers. Was even getting college credit for her work.”

“Christ. I’ll handle the feds.”

“Thank you, sir.”

She decided that she wasn’t going near the ME’s office for at least six months once she’d put Aaron Belton behind bars. Willa Rose was open all the way down the middle when Kyra entered Parker’s work area. Grimacing, she tried to forget about the sandwich she’d shoveled in on the way to the ME’s.

“Water and belladonna.” Parker didn’t raise his head. “Fairly long-term exposure to the belladonna. She might have been using it on her own in small dosages as a sedative.”

“Where’s the Voodoo doll?” It was time, she thought, to remove that pin.

“Evidence locker six with the rest of the tokens.” He looked up from the body and met her gaze. “I took the pin out when I was working on it. Standard pin; it looked like one of those old-fashioned hat pins that my wife collects for her wigs. Sort of weirded me out with where it was placed.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” She grimaced and looked at Willa Rose again. “You can’t buy belladonna just anywhere. She had to have a source for it.”

“I’d say she was seeing an herbalist.”

“Her medical records indicated a standard MD for medical care.”

“Then perhaps her relationship with the killer was a little more involved than you think.”

“Maybe.” She sighed. “The FBI is pressuring me for custody of Frees.”

“Tell them to stick it.”

"That is why I love you."

She found two suits standing in the middle of her office, having coffee and glaring at Desi, who was sitting primly at her desk, ignoring them. "What do you want?"

"Are you Inspector Moray?"

Kyra laughed. "Come now, you aren't going to convince me that the two of you didn't spend your entire trip here running over my service record, trying to find a way to put it to me so I'd do what you want." She dropped her workbag in her guest chair and went to her desk. Sitting down, she pushed her p-pc into the desk charging station.

"I'm Special Agent Marshall, and this is my partner, Special Agent Hertz. You'll be getting a call from the governor demanding that Frees be released into our custody."

"Orland Frees is a material witness and a likely accomplice in series of murders. He isn't going anywhere with you or anyone else."

"You want to make a wager on that?"

"Sure, let's wager careers." Kyra folded her hands over her stomach and watched them as she considered her words. Since open hostility wouldn't ultimately suit her needs, she chose cool and precise. "I'm going to charge Orland Frees with unlawful possession of a banned weapon. Then threatening of an officer of the law with said banned weapon. He'll also be charged with accessory to four separate counts of murder in the first degree and one count of kidnapping and mutilation with the intent to murder. *If* he gives up Aaron Belton before he can kill again, I'll recommend that he not be given the death penalty."

"You are beyond your scope."

"And you are beyond your jurisdiction. This is my case, my city, and he's my prisoner. He'll remain my prisoner, and I don't give a damn what the governor says."

"Your failure to cooperate will be noted."

"Good, make sure you spell my name correctly." She stood and picked up a soft pad. "Now, I have to go tell a seventeen-year-old girl's parents that their daughter is dead." Kyra paused and looked at Agent Marshall specifically; he'd done all the talking. "The next time you want to see me, consult my admin and make an appointment."

Desi watched her stride from the office with pursed lips. "I told you to be nice."

"She won't get away with this."

"I would suggest that you reconsider whatever you might have planned." Desi went back to her computer screen. "Inspector Moray gets more press in this city than anyone else with the department. It won't be a secret if you take her on."

"Are you threatening me?"

"I am reminding you that you aren't on your turf, and the wind blows in her direction in New Orleans."

* * * * *

Donald and Marlana Rose lived in a neat little neighborhood. Donald was in insurance, and Marlana was a nurse. Kyra sucked in a deep breath. "Okay, this won't be pretty."

"The husband works from home, and the wife works a second shift at the hospital. She's probably preparing to go to work." Ana checked her badge and looked at Kyra. "They have two younger children, but they're supposed to be in school for another hour."

"Let's get this done, then." Kyra turned off the vehicle and shook her head. "Notifications like this are the worse part of the job. Some days you might think it's working a scene or being in the ME's office, but it will always be the notifications."

Donald Rose opened the door before they made it all the way up the walkway. He stood there for a moment, as if he were taking a mental inventory of his family and wondering which one of his children the police were coming to talk to him about.

"Mr. Rose."

"Yes." He cleared his throat. "You're Inspector Moray. My son, Phil, is quite a fan of yours."

It was odd having fans, but since it seemed to make him more comfortable with her, she accepted his words with a nod. "May we come in?"

"I want to tell you no," he admitted softly as he stepped aside.

"Is your wife at home?"

"Yes, she's getting ready for work."

"You should get her." Kyra watched him walk away, his steps hesitant.

"I'll be right back."

Ana watched him leave the foyer; she cleared her throat. "I wish I'd stayed at the scene."

"I know." Kyra turned at the sound of tiny clicks on tile and turned to see the Roses enter the foyer.

"Come into the living room," Donald murmured softly and prodded his wife into the room before them.

Once seated, Kyra met Marlana's gaze and held it. "It is with regret that I have to inform you that your daughter Willa has been killed."

"An accident?" Marlana's eyes begged softly.

"She's a Major Crimes inspector, baby." Donald took up his wife's hand and threaded his fingers through hers. "Do you have the person who killed my daughter in custody?"

"Not at this time, no."

"Then it's the man that has been all over the news, the serial killer."

"That is our current line of thinking." Kyra cleared her throat. "Willa had a tattoo on her ankle. Do you remember when and where she got it?" From the shock that moved between them, she realized that they hadn't been aware of the tattoo. "We are going to need a list of Willa's friends and her schedule. Anything you can give us will go a long way toward helping us catch the man who killed her."

"Of course." Marlana started to stand, then sat back on the couch. "I'm sorry. I need a few moments."

"I'm going to leave my card; my p-pc address is on there. If you can forward me the information today, it would be very beneficial. I'll need you both to come down to the station and give statements."

"Her body?" Donald almost choked on the question.

"At this time, the medical examiner is keeping all of the bodies involved in the case in stasis. Once we have determined that all evidence needed to prosecute her killer is secured, we will release her for funeral arrangements. I assure you that he's treating your child with the utmost respect and care." Kyra stood. "Constable Salanti and I will be available to you if you have any questions."

Marlana reached out and grabbed her hand. "Can I see her?"

Kyra's mind filled with the bruised and battered face of Willa Rose and she swallowed hard. "Do you remember how she looked the last time you saw her?"

"Yes." Marlana nodded quickly.

"Keep that close to you, and when the time comes for you claim her, you remember that moment when she was smiling and alive." Kyra squeezed her fingers and then released her hand.

"How do you know what to say to them?"

Kyra buckled her harness and started the vehicle. "I try to imagine what I would want to hear if it were me in their place. I never lie. I avoid inflicting more pain than is necessary and always try to remember that they will remember my face, and the words I say will be with them the rest of their lives."

"Yeah." Ana fiddled with her harness and then shoved her p-pc into her workstation. "Orland Frees?"

"He does owe us another conversation."

"The FBI seems very serious about his release."

"They can shove it."

"You are foolish," Kyra murmured and stood away from the door she'd been leaning on. "With your prints in the shack, I have you solid on accessory charges."

“That’s bullshit.” He kept his gaze centered on the table. “Where’s my advocate?”

“On the way. Trust me, we have no intention of giving you a way out of this.” Kyra glanced at her comm-u to check the time. “We probably have another ten minutes alone together.”

“I had nothing to do with the killing of those women, and you can’t pin it on me.”

“Actually, you knowingly harbored a killer and didn’t report his first crime to the police. In not reporting Aaron to the authorities, you committed a crime. A crime that could very well put you in prison for the rest of your life. Of course, later on we’ll get to the three little boys that were killed around the same time Aaron supposedly died. Did he do them, or did you? It sounds like a lot for a seven-year-old to accomplish, but I think he had it in him even back then.”

“I’m a fucking national hero, lady. I won’t go to jail.”

Kyra laughed. “That might have been true yesterday, but it isn’t true today. The government isn’t going to interfere here; you won’t get a free ride this time. I have you, Orland. I have you solid, and if you don’t tell me where I can find Aaron, I’m going to make sure that you get tried as a participant. I’ll get you on a table with an injection in your arm inside the next year.”

Picking up the remote to the viewing screen, she clicked it on and displayed a picture of Willa Rose. “Aaron killed Willa Rose this morning. She was seventeen years old, Orland. You could have saved her life, and don’t think I will forget that.”

She set the remote down, leaving the picture of Willa obscenely posed for his viewing. The door opened, and one of the best criminal advocates in the city walked in. Kyra smiled. She’d requested Mason Lowery for Orland. He’d defend his client’s rights zealously, leaving no room for appeal when everything was said and done.

“I’ll give the two of you an hour to get acquainted.” She pointed at the screen. “She’s the last one, Orland. You give me the information I need, or you’ll pay for Aaron’s crimes.”

She found Ana on the observation deck, a temporary workstation set up. The sound had been turned off and the recordings stopped to protect the advocate/client relationship. Kyra leaned against the one-way viewing window so she wouldn’t have to look at Orland, and focused on Ana. “Any reports from Agent Lehman concerning the diary?”

“Yeah. We have a summary of the entire contents. He must have been up all night reading and working with that thing.”

“What’s the verdict?”

“Both of Aaron’s parents died the night of the fire.” Ana looked up and then out into the interrogation room. “Aaron watched his father beat his mother to death, and then he waited until his father fell asleep and cut his throat.”

“Aaron killed his own father.”

“That’s what the diary indicates.” Ana cleared her throat as she continued. “He set fire to the house and ran to Orland Frees for help. Orland Frees and Nera Belton were having a sexual affair, and she was preparing to leave her husband. Orland was deeply entrenched in Voodoo and seemed to be a perfect match for her and her son.”

“She’s going to leave, so Jake kills her.”

“Yes, and her son killed him in revenge.”

“Orland is a practitioner of Voodoo?”

“I’ve already called Clara; there is no record that he was ever a registered member of her faith or that he’s actively practiced. All of his knowledge and his devotion to the faith probably began and ended with Nera Belton. Upon her death, he took that knowledge and force-fed her disturbed son with it. He corrupted the religion and its beliefs when it suited him.”

Kyra looked back to Orland, who was waving his arms as he spoke. “He picked up where Aaron’s parents left off. Between the domineering mother and the abusive father, Aaron was already messed up beyond help. Killing his father must have pushed him right over the edge.”

“Leaving it relatively easy for Orland to shape and twist him into what he is today.”

“What about the choice of victim?”

“Aaron speaks of collecting and holding female spirits. He also believes that he must find the perfect woman for his mother to return. She’ll need a body to live in.” Ana’s mouth twisted in distaste. “Anyway, the diary clearly indicates that Orland orchestrated the killings from the very beginning. He didn’t do any killing himself, but he made Aaron believe that it was the only way to bring his mother back.”

“The other children?”

“The only mention of them is at the beginning. Aaron said he had to ‘silence them’ to protect his mission.” Ana cleared her throat. “A budding serial killer at seven.”

Kyra looked back to the interrogation room. Orland was sitting in a chair and nodding briskly. Whatever Mason Lowery was telling him, he was accepting it without a single complaint. She expected that they’d be ready for her to rejoin them soon enough. It was time, she thought, to end this. After a moment, both men grew still. Mason Lowery came to the viewing screen and knocked on it.

She picked up her p-pc and checked her inbox. Ana had already forwarded all the reports concerning the diary to the unit. “He isn’t getting a deal that lets him walk.”

“Should I call the DA?”

“Yeah, and request that the commander come down.” She shrugged out of her jacket and dropped it on the empty chair beside Ana.

Out in the hall, she stopped and took a silent moment to prepare. She had Orland Frees, and she had Aaron with him. As soon as that was clear, she would have all the information that was needed.

Pushing open the door, she first looked at Mason, who was pale. She almost regretted bringing him in. She couldn't really regret it, and they both knew it. Since any apology would have appeared false, Kyra schooled her expression and sat down across from Orland.

"Jake Belton killed his wife and your lover. That night when Jake went to sleep, Aaron killed him to avenge the death of his mother. He came to you for help, and he's been with you ever since. Over the years, you trained him in the Voodoo that Nera had taught you, and prepared him for his mission. The mission you gave him." She held up her hand when he would have spoken. "You convinced Aaron that he could resurrect his mother by hunting and murdering young women. He came home after each killing and told you what he had done and how he'd done it. Do you believe that he can bring his mother back to life by butchering women?"

"He believes it," Orland said simply. "I want immunity."

"You'll get immunity over my dead body." Kyra leaned back in her chair. "However, the DA is willing to take the death penalty off the table if you give me the information I need to take Aaron down before he kills again."

"I didn't kill anyone."

"Not directly." Kyra studied Orland for a moment. "You took a damaged and disturbed child and twisted him further for your own pleasure. I'm not sure what you had to gain in all of this, but trust me when I tell you that I will find out."

"You don't know anything."

"I know that you used to be a powerful man who believed he had a mission from God." She leaned back in her chair. "You were in love with Nera Belton despite her religious beliefs. You allowed yourself to be tutored in her religion so that you could bang her, and she fell for it. After the New South Militia fell, all of your power was gone. You could no longer control the men around you, and that must have been infuriating."

"Immunity."

"I'd sooner take out my gun and shoot you right now." Kyra smiled when his mouth dropped open. "You think this isn't personal, Orland? You might have created a monster, but he's not on your leash anymore. I'll find out why you set him loose on the women of New Orleans like you did. You needn't worry that I won't. Aaron tried to kill a woman very close to me. If I find that was your idea ... you won't have to worry about going to prison."

"I had nothing to do with that."

"He brought the van to you after he did it. That's how I found you, Orland. Aaron knew that the victim had left her p-pc activated and in the van. I tracked it to find you. He

delivered you to me on a silver platter. I imagine he thought I'd kill you." She stood and stretched. "In truth, I'm beginning to regret that I didn't."

"Inspector." Mason's tone was one of warning, but she caught the underlying amusement. "If you threaten my client again, this discussion is over."

Orland crossed his arms over his chest. "I want immunity."

"It's not going to happen." Kyra turned and met his gaze. "And if he kills again while you're playing this stupid game, the DA will not back down on the death penalty."

"You have to give me something."

"He killed a cop," she murmured. "He killed a cop's kid. He marked a high-ranking city official for slaughter. He raped and tried to murder one of the richest women in the city."

"Aaron did all of that, not me."

"That's right. He did it all, but he did it because you convinced him that he should." She pointed her index finger at him. "Don't think for a minute that the whole world won't know that you created a monster. You are not going to get out of this."

"Tell her." Mason looked from Kyra's face to Orland's. "You should tell her before the deal is gone."

"Damn it, I can't go to jail."

"You forfeited that option the day you took Aaron Belton in."

"Maximum security with a private cell."

Kyra snorted. "Would you like a servant while we are at it?"

"I'm an old man. I won't last in jail without it."

"Fine, I'll speak with the DA." Kyra walked towards the door. "This deal won't matter if he kills again before we can catch him."

"It's acceptable." Jessica watched Orland Frees move around the interrogation room with a frown of distaste. "I wish she'd killed him, too."

The door opened, and Kyra entered.

Ethan Baker grimaced. "The slimy son of a bitch in there doesn't deserve a single break."

"We can't wait for Aaron to fuck up and get caught." Kyra walked to Ana and peered over her shoulder. "Any luck on connecting any of the victims?"

"No."

"Should we wait on a deal?" Jessica asked.

"No. God, we don't have time." Kyra grimaced and looked back at her prisoner. "As sick and twisted as Aaron is, it's all Frees's fault. Aaron was doomed from the start."

"Pity, Inspector?"

“Yes.” She frowned as she admitted it. “Yes, pity. Aaron was a corrupt and vicious child, and he never stood a chance. Not a single one.”

Mason Lowery nodded and input his digital signature. “It’s in order.”

Orland looked toward the soft pad and wet his lips. “Okay, then.” He folded his hands in front of him on the table and cleared his throat. “I got another place, deeper in the wetlands. He’s there.”

“It’s not a registered holding.”

“No. No.” Orland shook his head. “You can’t even get to it using roads. He took the watercraft and left the van about an hour before you arrived.”

“Weapons?”

“Standard hunting rifle, enough ammunition to hold you off for a few days if he gets dug in.”

“Who’s his next target?”

“Don’t know. He took pictures and brought them home to me occasionally, but I never heard any names. Never saw pictures of the cop or that socialite he took the other night.”

“He had pictures of Ms. James on his kill board in the shack, but not pictures of his last victim.”

“He likes to keep the pictures of his current choice with him,” he murmured and sat back in his chair when he looked in Kyra’s direction. Fury was pouring off her. A part of him knew that no matter what deal he’d made, prison wasn’t going to be any easier for him. She’d make sure of it. “I can make you a map of his location.”

“I’m sure one of my team is pulling a map so you can mark the location for us.” Kyra stood from the table and looked toward the viewing window. “Anything else?”

“He’ll make every effort to get himself killed.”

“Just like you, Orland, a quick and easy death isn’t going to be an option for Aaron. Unless, of course, he takes the coward’s way out and eats a bullet.” Kyra picked up her p-pc and the compu-pad that held the plea agreement. “If you’re lucky, I’ll never have another reason to be in the same room with you.”

* * * * *

She was perfect, wasn't she? Sweet, perfect Willa. I enjoyed her the most. She trusted so easily and so much. Her sacrifice means all the more to the mission. I am close now; all I have to do is wait for the right moment to bring you and Kyra together, and the mission will be complete.

I'm so glad you are pleased.

Chapter Twenty-One

Kyra hated the swamp. Being hip-deep in waters that had questionable amounts of pollution and a large number of alligators just made her itchy. Night had fallen, which she supposed was to their advantage. The fifty-man team she'd assembled for the takedown had spread out so they could approach the small cabin from every direction. Allowing his escape wasn't an option.

The radio she'd snapped onto her vest buzzed. "Yeah."

"All snipers are in position."

"Remember, no kill shots unless our options are zero." Saying it filled her mouth with acid. She wanted Aaron Belton dead in a way that she doubted she'd ever recover from. The simple desire to kill him and make him hurt in the process made her doubt every year of service she'd given the NOPD.

"Understood."

She put the radio away and checked the position of the team she was leading. Ana was several feet away from her. She looked strong and ready for anything. A part of Kyra had wanted to leave her back at the station, not because she didn't trust her but because Ana was still sort of shiny and bright. Taking down a serial killer was going to rub all that off.

Her comm-u buzzed in her ear, and she manually activated the call to receive it. The computerized voice verbalized Desi Marcos's name and then made the connection. "You're his next target."

"Oh, really?" Kyra continued to move up the stream she was in and hopped up on a sandbar to survey their surroundings. "I'm a half a mile from his location."

"His diary is full of ravings about you and how you're the perfect host for the spirit of his mother."

"That's so damn sick." Her hand went unwillingly to her gun.

"We could spend years analyzing his diary," Desi continued. "Anyway, thought you might want to know. Depending on how this goes down, you might be able to use this against him."

"Thanks." Kyra ended the call and looked at Ana, who had paused several feet from her. "The snipers have their visuals set up. We need to move faster."

"The secondary team is in position, and team six approaching from the north has the back of the structure secured. There is no obvious back door and no windows. He's going to have to come straight out at us."

"Perfect."

She jumped down off the sandbar and motioned Ana ahead of her. Giving her point had been a message of trust that she hoped the other woman understood. A flashlight bounced off her face, and she glanced to her right to where Liz Givens stood. The woman was silent and so very still that for a moment Kyra thought she might have come face-to-face with an alligator.

Following Liz's gaze, she saw Aaron's shack clearly visible just ahead of her. Ana had dropped back to her left just a foot in front of her and had her gun out. The time had come, and though it had only been days, it felt like months or years. She pulled her own weapon and moved up ahead of both women. The radio on her vest started to buzz gently against her as the members of the team moved into place. Jerking it free, she scanned the area.

"Anyone have a visual?"

"Sniper four reporting movement in the front room of the building. All reports indicate that there are four rooms to the structure. Heat sensors indicate there is only one individual in the building."

"Weapons?"

"Heat signatures indicate one hunting rifle, civil service configuration. He won't be shooting gel bullets, folks. Ready and willing to make holes."

The gel bullets used in hunting exploded on impact and would sedate a large animal in under a minute. A human hit with one would go down in seconds and be out for hours. Not deadly, but certainly debilitating in the short term.

"Orland's gun had been configured to take live ammo, as well," Ana murmured. "What do you want to do?"

Kyra continued to move forward until she hit land. The dock had one watercraft tied off. "Someone disable that craft. We can't afford for him to get loose in the waterways."

"Already done, Inspector."

"First cop that lets this son of a bitch shoot them is getting their ass kicked." Kyra clipped her radio back onto her vest.

Using hand signals, she let Ana and Liz know where she wanted them as she left the group and moved toward the shack. At least this one wasn't on stilts, she thought, as she moved quickly through the wooded area surrounding the structure.

Pressing herself up against the wall just four feet from the door, she nodded when Ana took an opposite position. The murmur of a vid-screen could be heard through the thin plank door. The both stilled, listening for signs of movement or an indication that he'd realized he was no longer alone.

Kyra rolled her head on her shoulders and tightened her grip on her gun. Moving to the door, she used the butt of her weapon to bang on the door. "NOPD! Open the door!"

Feet hit the floor inside the shack, and she stepped back from the door a little. "Aaron Belton, come out with your hands empty and visible, now!"

She jerked visibly at the audible crack of a twelve-gauge shotgun being primed. A banned weapon, one with no electronic heat signature. Just seconds passed before the gun fired. She moved, but shot from the weapon splintered the door, and pain ran down the length of her arm from her shoulder. Pain and fury mixed as she looked briefly at her flesh wound and then motioned Ana away with her weapon.

Ana shook her head, glanced once at Kyra's shoulder before she moved closer, and then turned to kick in the door. Aaron stood before them, dazed, his short blond hair disarranged. The shotgun was primed for another shot. He started to lift it.

"You can live or you can die," Kyra said softly as she raised her gun and flipped on her laser sight. The blue laser light moved up the bridge of his nose to the center of his forehead. "Your choice."

"You're bleeding, Inspector."

"Yes," she steadied her arm and met his gaze. "Would you like to join me in that activity?"

"I can't have you interfering in the plans I made. My mother needs me." He took several steps back and stumbled briefly against the fold-up chair that was sitting in front of the vid-screen. "You don't understand."

Kyra looked from his trembling hands and then to his face. "Your plans no longer matter, Aaron. Put down the weapon before you make me kill you."

"I can't!" he shouted as he looked wildly around the room, searching for escape.

"I have fifty cops outside, every one of them intent on not letting you get away. It won't happen. Even if you shoot one of us, the others will have plenty of time to put a bullet in your head before you can load the ancient piece of shit you have there."

He jerked the shotgun and centered it on Ana. "How much do you value your partner's life, Inspector?"

Kyra inclined her head, lowered the laser beam to his left shoulder, and fired. His body jerked on impact, and he stumbled backward, dropping the gun. Keeping her weapon on

him, she moved forward and kicked the shotgun back toward Ana. "If you'd listened, you might have gotten out of this room without a hole in your body."

"Fuck you." He backed away, holding his shoulder, blood gushing from the wound and through his fingers. "It wasn't supposed to be this way!"

"Turn around and face the wall, put your hands above your head, and keep them that way."

"My shoulder ..."

"Don't make me kill you." Their gazes locked. "You think I won't?"

"I have a mission."

"Turn around and put your hands on the wall." She lowered her weapon and the laser beam danced off on his crotch. "A pretty boy like you won't be needing that in jail anyway."

He turned toward the wall, shaking, and lifted his hands to place them flat against the wall. "Aaron Belton, you are under arrest for homicide in the first degree, kidnapping, and sexual assault with the intent to murder. You have the right to remain silent during transportation.

"You have the right to be represented by an advocate during questioning. If you cannot afford representation, it will be provided at no cost to you. Any and all statements made during questioning will be recorded and used within the confines of your criminal trial. Failure to provide the truth will result in additional charges being filed against you. Do you understand these rights as they have been defined?"

Kyra fitted him with restraints carefully, tightening them to the point where he couldn't pull his wrists free, and then turned to Ana. "Signal that we're ready for water transport."

"Already done."

"This can't be happening," Aaron whispered. A sob broke his voice, and he fell to his knees.

Kyra backed away from Aaron, holding her upper shoulder, and watched Ana pull him to his feet and lead him out the door. There was no thrill of victory, no rush of a job well done. She doubted there could ever be a victory in the face of so much wrong.

* * * * *

Kyra winced, glaring at the medic briefly as she watched him apply antiseptic to her wound. "You sure I don't need to see a doctor?"

"You have several spots where buckshot from the weapon grazed your skin. Your nanobots are already working the injury. However, you can certainly be transported to emergency if you want to be a pansy about it."

She shook her head and glowered at him as he applied several bandages to the wounds. She looked around the scene. Aaron was already on his way to Police Plaza, while the rest of the team processed the shack and the land surrounding it. They'd found the burn site for the victim who had been delivered to Kyra in the jar, as well as another diary.

The medic pulled out a pressure syringe and injected what she hoped was a painkiller. "Thanks. If you're lucky, I'll forget about that pansy remark."

He grinned. "No problem. That will last you about six hours. I'll put a call in for a prescription to be delivered to your home address. No lifting with that arm for at least a day. Give it time to heal."

"So, I get to drive," Ana announced as she appeared at her side. "We're also drawing straws to see who gets the privilege of kicking your ass."

Kyra lifted one eyebrow and snorted. "Not going to happen." She pulled her keys out of her jeans. "But you can drive."

* * * * *

Kyra threw open her door and looked on Alex with relief. "Hey."

He glared at her as he moved into the apartment and shut the door. "You were shot?"

She shrugged and motioned to her arm, currently covered in the silk of her robe. "Just a few grazes. The asshole fired a shotgun full of buckshot at me."

Alex followed behind her as she moved into the living room. "You know I may not get to say a whole lot about what you do, but when you get shot I would appreciate being informed that you aren't dead. I had to hear you were shot on the goddamn news, Inspector."

She sat down on the couch and stared at him. It was the first time, she realized, that she'd actually seen him furious. It hadn't occurred to her to contact him after the scene had been secured, not even when they'd run off a reporter who'd gotten in on the action. "It didn't seem like a big deal. What did the reporter on the news say?"

"That you'd been shot during the apprehension of a fugitive and that there was no word on your condition," Alex ground out through clenched teeth. "You turned off your p-pc and your comm-u."

"Yeah." She leaned back against the couch and rubbed her face.

"I won't tolerate a second seat in your life. I deserve more and so do you."

She pushed her hair back from her forehead and stared at him as he threw himself into a chair across from her. "Alex, it just didn't occur to me. Pardon me, but it's been a while since I've let myself get involved with a man like this. We've barely known each other a week, and to be frank, this hasn't been an average week for me. Next time, I'll do better."

"It's the next time that's got me fucked up," Alex admitted. "It's not easy."

Kyra swallowed back a knot of dread. This was not the conversation she wanted to have with him. Was he going to bail on her? "I warned you. My life isn't a picnic, Alex. You knew that from the start."

"Knowing it on an intellectual level and having to deal with it on an emotional level are two entirely different things." He met her gaze and sighed. "I spent the better part of my adult life surrounded by death and violence. I retired from the military to escape it."

"Now you find yourself tangled up with a murder cop." She shook her head and laughed sadly. "Is this over for us?"

He jerked as if she'd struck him, and stood. "Hell, no. I'm nowhere near finished with this ..." He waved his hand around between them. "Whatever the hell *this* is."

"Okay, then, we'll need to work out a deal. I'll try to be more considerate of you, and you'll try to remember that I'm really bad with relationships."

He laughed ruefully at that. "Okay."

"Still, I'll try to do better."

"Did I wake you?"

"Yeah." She stood and smiled. "Want to nap with me?"

"Are you in any pain?"

"No, the medic on the scene set me up with a painkiller."

Kyra nodded breathlessly as Alex moved over her and slid between her legs. She lifted her hips up as he placed a soft kiss on her hip. "I'm really okay, you know."

"Hmmm." He sank his teeth into the flesh of her inner thigh briefly and lifted his head to meet her gaze. "We've yet to establish that."

"I want you inside me."

"We'll get there."

His husky promise did nothing to soothe her. She moved under his hands and moaned when his mouth settled on her pussy. As much as she wanted him to fill her, the sweet glide of his tongue on her clit made asking for it again unbearable. Curling her fingers into the sheets beneath her, Kyra spread her legs wide and moved against his mouth.

He lifted his head and met her gaze. "You realize when you move like that, it drives me insane?"

She laughed and held out her hand for him. "Come here."

Alex moved upward and pressed the head of his cock against her entrance. She stiffened briefly and sighed with relief when her body relaxed and gave in to the invasion of his cock. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she drew him down with her uninjured arm and groaned when he let his weight rest on her.

"Your arm is okay?"

She nodded at the question he whispered against her lips. "Yes, fine."

"I'm sorry I came over here all pissed off."

Kyra chuckled and bit down on her lip as he flexed his hips against her. "I should have called, or at least had someone call you."

"I should be letting you rest."

Tightening her legs around his waist, she glared at him. "Mr. Waters, I would suggest that you finish what you've started here, or there will be a reckoning in this bed."

"That's a tempting threat." He thrust against her hard and moaned a little when her hips pushed up against his.

She lifted both arms to the headboard and wrapped her hands around the iron bars. "Harder."

"I never thought I'd find a demanding woman sexy."

She moaned and lifted up against him again. "Alex."

He responded with a deep thrust; they both sucked in air as he pulled back almost completely from her. Then he sank back into her welcome heat with a slow, deliberate thrust. Her knuckles went white around the bars of the headboard, and she thrust her hips up against him.

Soft moans and fierce demands blended with the intimate sounds of flesh smacking against flesh. Skin grew damp with sweat; hands bit into muscles to grip and to demand more.

Alex slipped one hand between them and thumbed her clit in time with the stroke of his cock. She whimpered beneath him, and her legs slid from his thrusting hips. Feet planted flat on the bed, she rose up against him and cried out with pleasure. Orgasm rushed against the heated flesh of her pussy and spread out over her hips. Her whole body clenched in response. The muscled walls of her pussy tightened around his cock and forced his orgasm in nearly the same instant.

He collapsed on top of her, breathing hard. With a soft groan, he rolled off of her and onto his back. "I've changed my mind. I don't think I can see you anymore."

"Oh, yeah?" Kyra rolled her head to look at his face.

"Yeah. Sex with you is going to be the death of me."

"There are certainly less pleasant ways to die." Kyra sat up and shook back her hair. "I have to get down to the station."

"You know that can all wait until tomorrow. You caught the bad guy, Kyra. Give yourself some time to relax." He pulled her back down and into his arms.

"Yeah, I got the bad guy." She frowned, because it still didn't seem true. "Aaron Belton never had a chance of a normal life. He was corrupted from birth."

"Do you think he'll stand trial?"

"Hell, no. He's so damn crazy, I doubt we'll even get a shot at a competency hearing."

"But the system will be able to keep him?"

"Yes. We'll get to keep him inside a facility for the rest of his life." Staring at the ceiling, she shook her head and sighed. "I hate that I pity him."

"I admire it, especially after the things he did to Glory."

"She pities him, too. Despite all that I know about his life and what made him what he is today, I'd still put a bullet in his head if I thought I could get away with it."

He was silent for a moment, letting what she'd said sink into the darkness around them. "I understand."

"I've only killed in the line of duty twice. Once when I was still a constable and once when I worked Anti-Crime as a detective. For weeks after those two events in my life, I questioned my choices and if I'd made the right decisions. I eventually made peace with what I'd done, but I can still see their faces when I let myself think about it."

"I can't give an accurate account of how many people I've killed."

"Military service is different."

"No, it's just more acceptable. When a soldier kills in the line of duty, it's rarely questioned. When a cop guns down a suspect during a crime, it's investigated and determined to be just or unjust."

"What happened to John's lover?"

Alex grimaced. "He took friendly fire in the back."

She closed her eyes at the guilt in his voice. "Your gun?"

"They never did determine which one of us shot him. The bullet was too damaged for a ballistics match. But they could determine that the round was NAU military issue. We were the only unit on the ground, which means one of us shot him in the back."

"Do you blame yourself?"

"No, he advanced in position twenty minutes earlier than was planned and never informed anyone in the unit of his new position."

"John Deets thinks you made the kill shot."

"No, I don't think so. It was my unit. I didn't know where Frank was, and I should have."

"I take it you were in a combat situation."

"Yes."

"Do you know who made the kill shot?"

"God help me, I do." Alex rolled onto his side and looked at her face. "But I'll never let it be known. Frank made a foolish mistake, and knowing the truth would never serve John."

Kyra touched his jaw gently. He didn't have to say it. She could see it on his face and in his eyes. "No, it would never serve John."

Alex leaned down and kissed her mouth gently. "I didn't realize how invested I'd gotten until I heard you'd been shot."

She winced, then blushed. "I'm really going to try harder to keep you in the loop. I want us to be something ... something special, and that can't happen if you're constantly pissed off at me because of my penchant for injury."

He glanced down at the four circular bandages on her arm. "Still no pain?"

"I'm good. The medic told me that the shot he gave me would last about six hours."

"I want that something special, too, you know." Rubbing his thumb over her lips, he met her gaze. "So, we'll work on it together, and we'll both try hard to keep things on an even keel with us."

"Good, we're agreed." She sighed. "Now, I think it's time we discuss your aunt Clara."

Alex laughed and rolled onto his back. "I'm not disowning her. She's already made it very clear to me how she feels about you."

"I don't have to go to her house for holidays, do I?"

"No. We usually go to the parents' house. My father's parents are still alive and living in the Florida Keys."

"Did she tell you about my mother?"

Alex grimaced and focused on the ceiling. "Yeah."

"Good, then we don't have to discuss it." Kyra rolled onto her side away from him and sighed when he pulled her in to spoon against him.

"Do you know who your father is?"

"No, I never made any effort to locate the man who raped my mother." She took in a deep breath and slowly released it. "She loved me, and every day I was with her I knew that. My grandmother would have never told me. So I guess in some ways I owe Clara something. She was brave enough to tell me the truth about why my mother killed herself."

"Does it bother you?"

"Being the product of a rape? When I first found out, I was devastated. But I spent time looking through my mother's personal journals, and I realized that she never associated me personally with the act of violence that created me. I don't know how she did it. I don't think I could."

"Babies are easy to love. I'm glad that she at least had that in her life." He pulled her closer. "What a lonely woman she must have been."

"Yes." Kyra nodded in the darkness and closed her eyes. "My alarm is going to go off in three hours."

"Sleep, then, and we'll get up and face the world together."

THE END

Deanna Lee

Deanna Lee lives in the southern United States. She has been writing for eighteen years. Deanna is engaged to be married, works in a library, and spends her spare time writing and reading.

To learn more about Deanna's day-to-day trials, check out her website. She would love to hear from you! You can visit her on the web at www.deannaleebooks.com

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Why Me?

by Treva Harte

Available Now from Loose Id

Why Me?

"The Bide-A-Wee Hotel?" Cassie couldn't stop chortling. "I can't believe I'm actually staying at a place that really calls itself that."

She wasn't even totally sure what state they were in. Wynn had just shrugged when she asked and told her it was probably better if she didn't know. He was just driving randomly -- if he didn't know, no one would.

"Get used to life on the wild side with me, Cassidy Majors. This is only the beginning."

Cassie looked at the air conditioning unit in the window that had kicked on with a roar of sound but very little cool air to show for its efforts. She could see Wynn was silently studying the dust on the bureau.

"Yeah. I can tell life as I know it will never be the same again." Cassie's laughter stopped.

That wasn't much of a joke after all.

Wynn switched on the one dim working lamp near the twin beds. He sat on one of the beds. Wynn wasn't laughing either. He was staring at her.

All of a sudden her mouth felt dry.

"Cassidy?"

No one ever called her that.

"What, Wynn?" She tried to sound casual.

She didn't feel casual.

Everything she had been trying to ignore was bubbling up. They were in a motel room together. Just one room. Now that could mean nothing. They could be just buddies who happened to be sharing a room. There were double beds in the place.

On the other hand, it meant something to her. Wynn wasn't just the guy with an aura, just her mind-talking buddy in telepathy. There was a definite physical side to him. Oh, shoot, he was the sexiest guy she'd ever met. Cassie wasn't sure why but she'd given up trying to figure out why. Obviously tall, thin, spooky guys with intense stares and slow smiles turned her on.

She might as well admit that she wanted to have more than a telepathic link with him. What she couldn't figure out was why she was suddenly getting the feeling he was interested in her, too. She hadn't ever felt that before.

Cassie looked at the two beds and then looked away. What would he say if she just told him she wanted more from him? That she'd like to go to bed with him? Before he'd probably have just laughed or stared. She thought. Now she wasn't sure.

Wynn couldn't help looking at Cassie. He tried to play it cool, but he couldn't. She puzzled the hell out of him. He almost thought she was interested in -- well, she seemed interested in him.

She was oddly appealing, sure, but he'd been interested in women before. He could get them, too, sometimes, especially if he let himself peek into their minds.

The problem was, he had no confidence in actually keeping a woman interested. They didn't know about his gift, but something about him was different. Sooner or later they began to retreat from him. They always did. He wished he knew how the difference showed so that he could camouflage it more, make himself fit in better, but he never had.

Usually that difference kept women away from him unless he made a real effort to be with them. Usually the effort wasn't worth it.

But Cassie kept thinking he was sexy without him even trying to interest her. He had actually doubted his -- her -- thoughts at first. But she kept thinking it. She was still thinking it now. He didn't know why she believed he was some kind of stud, but he finally gave in and admitted to himself that he desperately wanted to live up to her expectations.

"Wynn?" She spoke it aloud this time. Oh, God, he could tell he was making her nervous now. "What do you want?"

And he could smell her. In this small room he couldn't escape. Wynn wasn't sure he'd ever been this near, this long to a woman in his whole adult life unless he was there for sex. He knew he couldn't remember ever before noticing what a woman smelled like. Not even when he was there for sex. He couldn't describe Cassie's scent but by now her perfume made him hard.

He imagined her clothing littering the room, him touching them and smelling them, and he swallowed. How could he stand being in a motel room without trying to sleep with her? By now he could tell when she was close to him, just from her scent.

Bloody hell, all his senses told him when she was aroused and the whole thing drove him crazy. Everything about her drove him crazy.

Whether he failed her or not, he had to try.

I want more from you, too. I'd really like to go to bed with you. No. That's not right. I'm dying to go to bed with you, Cassie.

* * * * *

What people are saying about

Why Me?

Why Me?

I loved this story! I found I couldn't put it down until I finished it. This story has scenes that will make you laugh as well as drama and adventure.

-- Angel Brewer, *The Romance Studio*

Why Me? has spicy romance with plenty of suspense to keep your attention. This story was full of interesting twists and turns... *Why Me?* is truly a wonderful romantic treat!

-- Patrice Storie, Just Erotic Romance Reviews

What would it be like to have a man know your every thought? Well, Ms. Harte shows us the pros and cons of such a feat, making *Why Me?* intriguing and enlightening. The romance between Wynn and Cassie sizzles, it's wonderful and refreshing.

-- Tracey West, The Road to Romance