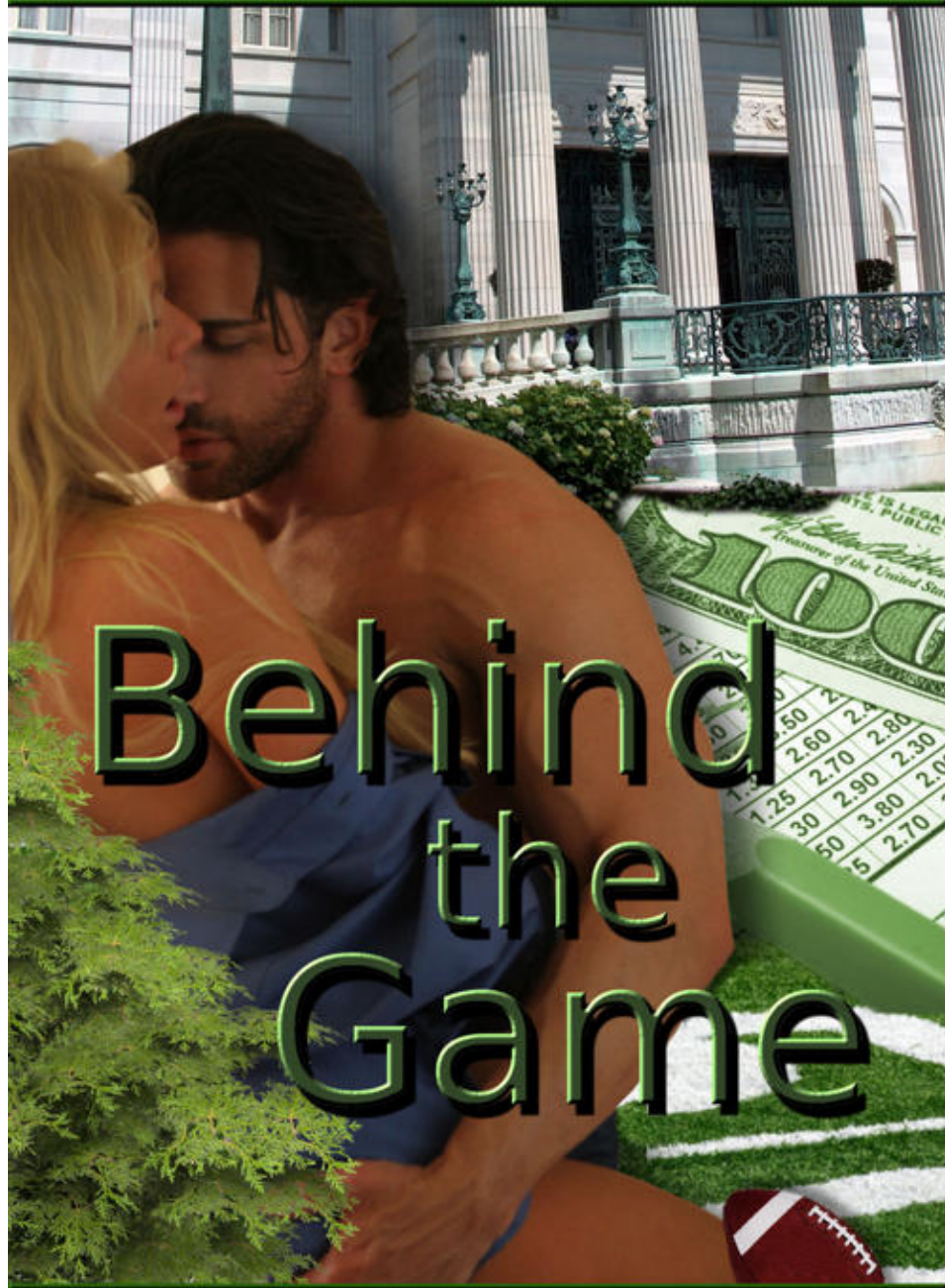


A Destiny Blaine Sports Romance



# Behind the Game

Destiny Blaine Productions

*Destiny Blaine*

## **Behind the Game**

By

Destiny Blaine

*Behind The Game*

WARNING

*Behind the Game* by Destiny Blaine  
contains explicit language and scorching hot  
love scenes.  
This material is intended for adult  
audiences only.

*Destiny Blaine*

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*Behind The Game*

*Dedication*

*For those good old boys near Knoxville,  
Tennessee—you know who you are. You'll never know  
how many book ideas you've inspired.*

*Thank you for the memories. Thank you for the  
friendship. Thank you for the ideas. Even if I write  
for another twenty years, I'll never be able to see  
every idea materialize. That's a pretty good feeling.  
You've been quite the inspiration.*

## Part One

### Unspoken Truths

The dark corner of the club defined cozy to the extreme. Secluded from the rest of the crowd, the dim candlelight leading to the alcove suggested the perfect setting for intimate conversation and with any luck, the beginning of a long overdue romance.

Ally's heart pounded against her chest. One delicious notion after another ran through her mind, cluttering her brain with what-ifs. She kept walking toward the nook. If for no other reason than to find out what a little determination earned a woman.

No matter how many times Tanner Dorsey humiliated Ally, she always followed him around waiting for a little more. He was her dose of self-inflicted punishment and as much as she'd love to defy her need to trail behind him, it wouldn't happen.

The reason was simple. Tanner was rough stock, the kind of man who knew how to make a woman look once and grovel for the rest of her natural born life.

Unfortunately, Ally wanted him, more than she longed for another hearty bite of double fudge brownie ice cream. Ally yearned for Tanner in a way she realized meant she'd never want another. Tanner was the bane of her existence. The snake bite she couldn't escape and the poison she craved.

When Ally first entered the club a few hours earlier, Tanner had toyed with her. He approached her on the dance floor and took the lead right away, denying her nothing while insinuating he couldn't wait to give her everything she so desperately desired.

He'd taken her in his arms and in one sleek move, locked her wrists around his neck, placing his hands

on her hips. And oh God, how they'd humped out an erotic dance, playing with one another, unable to resist the urge to bump body parts and grind out each and every titillating beat.

Once they were seated Ally knew what to expect. The game would change. Tanner's rules always hit a few snags. Once he saw the evidence of lust in her eyes, he would forbid even a simple touch unless he initiated the first caress.

Tanner glanced over his shoulder. "Don't worry baby. I don't plan to make all of your *Tanner does me* dreams come true." He stopped abruptly and flashed a wicked wink. "At least not tonight."

And just like that, moment ruined. Leave it to a man.

A cool sensation whipped around her nape and her face burned with embarrassment. The madder-than-hell white-hot warmth washed over her. *Who the hell did he think he was? Did he really think she'd give him the power to play her all over again?*

She quickly let go of his hand and stormed off in the other direction. Unfortunately, her body alerted her to the sudden loss as soon as they parted ways. She had a gut-wrenching feeling her heart would begin the breaking process all over again. When would she ever fully mend?

Making her way toward the closest exit, Ally passed curious onlookers, the same men who watched her with lust-filled eyes when she swayed onto the dance floor an hour or so after she arrived at the club. She rushed by the bouncers and barmaids only to leave the building filled with disappointment.

Tanner won again. He always did.

Once outside, Ally took a deep breath inhaling the undeniable musty smell of rain. A metal door slammed behind her and she didn't have to turn around to know who trailed her.

"Don't show up at clubs where you know I'll be if you don't want to deal with me, Ally. You knew I was

in there and you realized what you'd get when you found me."

Ally wheeled around on a spiked heel. "What did you just say?"

"You heard me, baby," he replied, biting down on his bottom lip and studying her with a provocative smirk.

How right he was. She hung onto every word. No doubt, he gauged her reaction when she marched over to him with anger-boiling-over strides. Those were hard to deny.

"Come on baby. Don't play dumb with me. How many light blue Corvettes do you see in this damn town with a Florida Gators tag? You knew I was here and..."

"You're right," she blurted out, refusing to deny anything. "You know it takes balls or blatant stupidity to run around Knoxville, Tennessee with University of Florida Gators plates on a car. Since you wear your ignorance proudly, you should be an easy mark when anyone wants to find you. Your car makes it uncomplicated, kind of takes the sport out of the chase if you want to know the truth."

Yes, she saw his convertible and ditto, she stopped because the driver of that snazzy automobile was inside his favorite dive. In fact, she couldn't wheel into the parking lot fast enough.

She waited for Tanner to say something but when he didn't she looked away. Damn. Where Tanner was concerned old habits didn't die hard, they smothered the life out of innocent bystanders, never mind virgins on the prowl.

"So tell me something, Ally," he rasped, rolling that sensational tongue over moist lips. "Am I your first stop?"

Screw him! Tanner had a way of putting things and very often, he left his truer meaning open for speculation. The anger he provoked left her at a disadvantage. Tanner Dorsey always boiled her blood.

"Well?"

"Well what, Tanner?" When he didn't come right back with a response, she quickly added, "I know what you're asking me, by the way."

"You do?" he asked, gnawing on his lip and trying to grab her by the hips in an effort to draw her closer. One thing about it, Tanner wanted her. Regardless of how much he tried to push her away, every time he brushed against her on the dance floor, his body suggested plenty. His erection said everything he never had the guts to say.

"Yes, I do."

"I doubt it. The only thing I wanted to know is if I'm your first gig. You kind of give that impression, you know what I mean?" He grunted. "Look at you all dolled up. You walk into Jake's, spot me on the dance floor and can't wait to get out there just so you can shake your pretty little ass in my direction. Oh *but yeah* Ally, when you got into town, you came looking and you knew exactly what to do with me when you found me. Tempt the hell out of me."

Ally couldn't help herself. Maybe it was immature but she didn't care. She never backed down from bantering back and forth with Tanner. "Did it ever occur to you that I was here to meet someone? In case you failed to notice, I was dancing just fine with..."

"Oh yeah you were. You got that part right. You always have the right moves. You don't need a man to show you what that little body of yours can do. Then again, I'm the only man in that joint who can handle that sweet little ass. I guess we're both lucky you found me without any problem."

Tanner struck a pose, folding his arms over a broad chest. God help her, he just had to go for the highest level of sex appeal whenever she was around. He added a wink to his naturally seductive look, and her knees turned to jelly.

Damn him to another century and back. No, on second thought, forget the round trip. Maybe he

could just vanish, become a time-traveler or something. Then she could get on with her life.

"What's wrong love, cat got that pretty little tongue of yours?"

No it wasn't a cat. It was more like a ferocious mountain lion.

She was putty in Tanner's hands but the asshole still acted like he was fifteen. He drove her nuts when she was twelve and into complete madness at eighteen. At twenty-two, no doubt, she was certifiable.

He was still full of himself and she was still tongue tied. She couldn't say a word. Not one, lone word. She huffed and puffed, or at least thought she managed to blow off some steam before she turned to search for her car. They were all alone in the well-lit parking lot, something she noted when she started walking.

"Looking for someone?"

"No, not really. Just making sure there aren't any witnesses around. I'd hate for someone to see me wallop you over the head a few times."

"Now why would you want to do a thing like that, Ally?" he asked, amused.

"Somebody needs to knock some sense into you."

Within seconds, he draped his arm over her shoulders and started undressing her with his eyes. "I can't die yet, baby doll."

"I didn't say I wanted to kill you but since you mentioned it, why not? Maybe death could be arranged. It seems like a viable option." She body surfed, taking a moment to really check him out. Yep, he still looked lean. Perfect. Good enough to eat.

Hell, someone needed to kick his ass. She picked up a steady pace again.

"No ma'am. I'm not ready to leave this big old world yet," he taunted. "I haven't experienced everything...everyone...at least not yet." He bracketed his arms around her waist and pulled her against him.

She could have sworn she heard a thump when she landed against his chest. No, that must have been the lump moving down her throat after it caught there on impact.

She gasped for a little air, trying to tell herself she wasn't affected by the stiff rise against her ass, or the intoxicating masculine scent of the man she'd loved for far too long.

Tanner knew how to take her breath away but she wasn't so mesmerized that she didn't remember her last trip home. She had to keep her distance and putting some space between them was practically the only lifeline she had left. "You think you're funny, don't you?"

"I'm fucking hilarious," he said. A beat later he added, "Do you mind telling me what I did that pissed you off this time?"

She pursed her lips and glared at him. Sure enough, he just didn't have a clue.

The year before, Ally had decided to leave Tanner in the past. She needed to look beyond the little school girl dreams because she couldn't see him in her future. After years of the unspoken and denied attraction between them, they'd never found common ground and as for any intimate satisfaction, well, that wasn't even on the radar.

Ally finally understood, or at least some part of her realized, when she joined the FBI, she sealed her fate. Tanner couldn't have a place in her future. With each passing day, she'd come to accept facts.

Yeah, right. That was precisely why she made a beeline for home as soon as she had a few days off.

"Can I hitch a ride back to my place?" Tanner asked, interrupting her thoughts when she stopped behind her four-door Honda Accord.

"Sorry, not tonight."

"Why not?"

"You can drive yourself."

"True, I could," he said. A strike later he said, "But look at me. Do I look like a man who likes to ride

alone?" He flashed the kind of dimples that could've stopped traffic on a crowded street. "If I get out there on the highway..." his words slurred on command, "I might get a dooey."

"A what?"

"You know," he said, grinning. "A DUI."

"Right, since you're so clearly inebriated off club soda?"

Before could object further, Tanner walked to her side of the car, determined to get a lift. "It's potent stuff, Ally."

"Tanner, I really don't have time for this tonight."

"Uh-huh, okay. You don't have a few extra seconds to drop me four buildings down from your own?"

She unlocked the car. He opened her door and then ran to the other side, apparently under the impression that she'd leave him behind, or plow over him just for the hell of it.

A few seconds passed without a word exchanged between them. Finally, she sighed—resigned to the fact she'd lost round one—and placed the key in the ignition. Leaning over the steering wheel, she looked up at the street light with unwarranted interest. "Why do you always do this?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, reaching across her middle and taking his time buckling her safety belt before securing his own.

"I'm serious, Tanner. You act like you could take me or leave me." She glanced over and when she did, he jumped at the opportunity to change the subject.

"I'm ready when you are baby doll."

That was the problem. She didn't think he'd ever be ready for her. Maybe she should thank him for that. At least he wasn't setting out to complicate her life. Tanner Dorsey came with a package full of problems. In fact, he represented the big red bow.

\* \* \* \*

A few seconds...she waited a couple of moments longer than she should have just to see if he'd take hold of an opportunity and for once, make their time together count. When he didn't, she shot him a sideways glance and shifted the car into reverse. "One of these days, Tanner, you're going to wait too long and miss your chance. You know?"

Tanner quickly reached over and slammed the car into park position. Luckily, she still had her foot on the break. "Ally, I can't stand a woman who mumbles. What were you saying? I don't think I heard you."

The old Ally would've dismissed his need for a further explanation. Perhaps she would've waved him off with lofty fingers and a girlish giggle. That Ally existed a long time ago. Ally was a new woman. The old Ally used to follow Tanner around with drool on her chin, but no more. She'd lived a little since the last time she'd seen Tanner.

Okay, so 'little' was a key word. She wasn't quite an experienced and worldly woman by any stretch of the imagination.

Ally narrowed her eyes and leaned forward. "I said..."

Tanner moved closer too. His lips parted. For a second there, she almost thought he might kiss her. Staring at her mouth, he said, "I heard you. Now explain why you brought that up. Why did you come here tonight Ally?" he asked, lowering his voice. "Did you come back for me?" He tucked a lock of her hair behind an ear. "Did you, darlin'?"

*Oh. My. God.* Could he be any more arrogant? Sometimes he was so easy to look at but so hard to tolerate.

Allowing her gaze to rake over him, she convinced herself he already had a grey hair or two, and maybe even a few wrinkles. *Maybe he'll age quickly. Surely he'll lose his sex appeal.*

"You came back for me, didn't you Ally?"

*Maybe he'll get a beer gut.*

"You've missed me, haven't you?"

*About as much as a woman misses menstrual cramps.*

"Thought about me every waking hour? Dreamt about me every time you closed your eyes?" He moistened his lips. "I've had some sleepless nights myself."

*Maybe, he'll lean over here and kiss me until tomorrow.*

Nothing ever changed between them. She would scour over his tall frame with a meticulous eye and try to find a blemish in his perfection before wishing him to a fate that would ruin him for another woman. At some point, she typically hoped he'd have an early end to his overactive sex life. That was pretty much a slim chance.

"Ally? Talk to me," he said, wrapping his index finger around her pinky in a playful manner. "Jake's isn't the place for nice girls. It's certainly not the type of establishment for *my* girl."

"Maybe I'm not a nice girl anymore." She wished that were true. At the same time, she longed to be his girl, in every sense of the word.

Her heart fluttered. Why did she even bother with this? Why put herself through the pure hell of hoping he'd claim her, praying he'd finally see that yes, she belonged to him. He was hers and she was his.

"I'm not an inexperienced girl anymore. I'm a woman, in all the ways that matter."

His lips twitched. Her confession bothered him and she could see the pain she inflicted all over his red face. Heck, his neck practically glowed in the dark.

"What if I want to test that for myself?" he whispered, right above her lips. She could literally breathe him in. His hand fell to her knee and steady fingers crawled up her inner thigh.

The twinkle in his gaze disappeared. His moist mouth hovered over hers offering the most seductive

temptation she'd ever known. Tanner focused on the rise and fall of her heavy chest and his stare alone heated her in places no man had ever gone.

"Convince me, Ally," he encouraged. "If you can." His free hand grazed her chest. A few fingers dipped into the neckline of her blouse and her breath caught.

One touch and she melted like margarine. Sweet sensations left her tingling wherever his fingers wandered, even though he didn't do anything she thought of as inappropriate.

Ally feared this side of Tanner.

His caress numbed her. Time stood still. Then, the second hand of life zoomed in reverse, reminding her of the heartache Tanner had brought her in the past.

Her eyes probably gave everything away. Could he look at her and tell how much she still cared for him? God she hoped not. A woman wearing her heart on her sleeve rarely tempted the man who put it there.

Tanner dropped his head and his swollen lips moved across her collarbone, skimming over her skin. Heated words were mumbled in a guttural voice practically promising uninhibited pleasures.

His damning mouth strategically worked its magic around her neck and ear but he refused to deliver a full throttled kiss. The refusal alone guaranteed his rejection would sting just a little bit more.

"Baby, you still aren't ready *for me* and that I can promise you." He moved away from her, tilting his head to one side and practically setting his jaw, as if his throaty statement bothered him. He smoothed his palm over her leg with a slow final stroke.

Ally sat there dumbfounded. The warmth he'd stirred between her legs made her all too aware of the chemistry they shared. He did this to prove a point. He wanted to make sure she still wanted him and now he had his proof. The confirmation he needed to feed his ego.

"Please Tanner, drive yourself home," she finally choked out.

Ally wanted to scream and at the same time she wanted to yank him by the collar, to know what it felt like to have her lips crash against his. Hot, raw emotion ate at her gut. She was on fire from his touch, too aware of the uncomfortable puddle of slick heat forming between her legs.

"I'm not getting out," he deadpanned.

"If I thought you were too drunk to drive, I'd do the right thing and give you a ride."

He moved close to her one more time, tilting her chin and clasping his hand under her jaw, playing her for all she was worth and then some. "I'll make a deal with you. If you'll take me home, see me to the door *and* kiss me good-night, I'll never tell Darren and David I saw you here."

Her eyes locked with his. "You wouldn't."

"Try me." A wicked grin shaped those boyish dimples. "In fact, I highly recommend you do that soon anyway. Since I know where your brothers are, you might just drag me off to your bedroom now. They won't be home for several hours."

"And play more games?" she spat. "No thank you."

"You're missing out, Ally-cat. I'm good for a one-night stand."

That's precisely why she wasn't about to take him up on his offer. Ally grated back fighting words. She wanted to smack Tanner's smug jaw the very second he tossed out the mention of her brothers. Oh, what she'd give to kick his firm behind.

He settled into his seat once again, leaning his head back. "I would tell on you Ally. Honestly, I'd enjoy watching them scold you. The big guys don't care how old you are. They'll always be around to keep you in line." He closed his eyes. "Of course at your age, I guess I could offer to spank you. Whew, damn, what I'd give to know the feel of your bare ass under my palm. Maybe now that you're old enough,

they'd even let me take care of the discipline. I might like it. You would love it. That's for sure."

Ally's dramatic sigh fell into the open. She pulled the gear shift into reverse and drove him home without another word but the smack-smack sound of Tanner spanking her ass offered plenty appeal. She could almost hear his hand popping against her bare ass, and oh what she'd give just to feel the first slap.

Great, she thought. It was safe to say, she'd lost her ever-lovin mind.

\* \* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later they pulled into their upscale townhome complex. She stopped in front of Tanner's building. When she mashed on the brake, she didn't have the chance to shove the gearshift into park. The arrogant ass in the passenger's seat did the honors.

"Well?"

"So you're here. Safe and sound, and by the looks of things, all in one piece."

"Yes, but you won't be if I go upstairs and happen to mention I saw you at Jake's. I'm not one to keep secrets from the big guys."

Now she was pissed. "Tanner, has it escaped your realm of understanding that I'm not a child anymore?"

"You don't say?" He moved closer to her. "I heard something about you working as a DEA or CIA agent or something. I just figured they hired kids, gave them a few water pistols, and waited for them to grow up."

"Like you did?"

"Yeah Ally, exactly like I did." He took a deep breath and then continued, "So how did a little thing like you pass the screening?"

Considering her family history, she often wondered the same thing.

"I'm qualified, trust me."

"I don't doubt you're capable," he said, eyeing her legs. "Come on. Walk me to the door."

Of course she did what he told her. It was instilled in her. If her brothers weren't telling her what to do when she was growing up, Tanner handled her. It hadn't gotten any better once she found a career with the FBI.

Sometimes she wondered why she chose a career in law enforcement. Had she done even that just to see if she could get under Tanner's skin? Maybe, and sometimes she wondered if she became an agent with the very agency on Tanner's cold trail in an effort to make him notice the woman she'd become.

After leaving the car, they strolled toward the building side by side. Usually she trailed behind him. "You look really good Ally, a sight for sore eyes and all that." Tanner wasn't much on sweet talking a woman.

"Thanks."

"How long has it been?"

She knew what he meant. "Over a year."

"I thought you weren't coming back," he taunted her.

"I changed my mind."

"Last time I saw you, you said there wasn't anything left for you in Knoxville."

"No, you were the one who made that clear. I haven't forgotten what you told me." In fact, she hadn't forgotten one word of their last conversation. He'd explained to her, with finality in his voice, she would never be in his heart or in his bed.

"What a stupid boy I was," he said, studying her with an intense focus.

"Well, anyway, as you can see I survived the last blow. Bounced back without a scratch," she said flippantly, though if she were truthful with herself, she wasn't so sure.

How many times had she walked up these very steps to find her brothers? How many times had her parents sent her to fetch them cursing because they were mixed up with Tanner and his *business*?

*Behind The Game*

The familiar noise of football games drifted into the breezeway. "Which one is here?"

His eyes twinkled. "Which one do you want to see first?" He put the key in the lock, turned the knob, and pushed the door back to showcase one familiar illegal sight.

## Chapter Two

"Damn Tanner!" David jumped first. "Shit, man! Why did you have to bring her here and put her in this position?"

Darren shoved by him and spread his arms wide. "How's my baby sister?"

Ally couldn't help but smile at her older brothers. "Not a baby now but always your sister." She embraced Darren before planting a kiss on David's cheek.

"Hey now, I didn't even get a hug." Tanner winked. She'd given him more than a squeeze on the dance floor.

David was pissed. He didn't look away from the computer screen for more than a second. "Why the hell didn't you call first?" Her brother locked eyes with the man who'd always held the keys to Ally's uncooperative heart.

Tanner played it cool. "I thought you might want to see your long lost sibling. I lured her here with my irresistible charm."

He'd been leading her around by the nose since she could remember. Why should he stop now? "Tanner's persuasive nature had nothing to do with it," Ally said. "Is it a sin for a sister to come looking for her brothers?"

"Not at all," Darren assured her. "We've missed you."

"The day Tanner charms anyone other than himself will be the day we give up the business," David added, still pouting.

"I still have that magic touch," Tanner assured them, trying his best to irritate at least one of the brothers.

David studied Ally and ignored Tanner. "Did you go out dressed like that?"

"Forever the conservative one." She couldn't help but pat David on the back. "Don't worry, Tanner

was the first person I saw and he took good care of me."

"Yeah, I just bet he did," David muttered.

Tanner shot her a wink and then undressed her with his eyes. He always had such an alluring way of assuring her he was capable of gaping at every inch of her body. He'd never dared to tower over it in a more explicit exploration but she'd bet dollars to donuts, he'd thought about it plenty of times, just like she had.

With the short white skirt clinging to her hips and low-cut black tank, it was safe to assume sex was on the minds of several men who'd caught a glimpse of her shape at Jake's. It was probably the main reason Tanner seemed hell-bent on keeping her under careful observation. Once he'd spotted her, Tanner ditched the brunette hanging on his arm and he snarled at any man who came within ten feet of them.

"Take her home, Darren. She doesn't need to be here. Have you forgotten who writes her paychecks? The last thing we need is the FBI breathing down our necks."

Tanner strolled over to the refrigerator, opened the door, grabbed a can, and popped open a beer. "FBI, DEA, CIA, what's the difference?"

She volunteered to clarify. "There *is* a difference."

"Then you'll have to explain them to me sometime." His careful scrutiny tempted her but she knew it was just that. The damn lure of temptation was one thing but the forbidden fruit, something else altogether.

Tanner loved mind games. He always toyed with her, but things were different now. She'd matured and forgotten all about him. She didn't even care. She barely noticed him or the undeniable chemistry that had kept her brothers threatening him for most of his adult life. As for his sex appeal, well a man had to lose that at some point. She'd just wait him out.

The phones started humming all at once. It was Monday Night and the calls started coming in at one time. Tanner set the beer down before grabbing a pen and notepad. Her brothers were already in their little game zone and the bookie-lingo began. "Gentleman, play ball!" Tanner rubbed his palms together. His eyes danced across the room and for a moment she swore they flashed dollar signs.

"Talk to me, man. You got the lines?" Darren took the first call as the room rang out with sports chatter.

"Giants are four; the over and under is thirty-six."

"A dime on Cowboys plus four? Is that it baby? Alright you got it!" Tanner shouted, slamming down one phone and grabbing another.

Smiles lit up the place. The familiar sounds of booking bets took Ally back to another time, stamping her ears with the obvious signs of things to come. The illegal activity reminded her of a past she'd never outrun.

Ally browsed around the room while the sing-song voices continued to chant with lines. The over and under totals were given one minute while Tanner relayed the proposition bets the very next breath.

"What? No. We've got your action baby. If you want two dimes on it, you're covered. Three? Hell, why not go four?" Darren encouraged the big bets. They must've felt damn confident they were on the winning end. Funny how that worked, the odds always favored the house.

"Who is this? Who? Yeah. Yeah. I know you. Well, let's see. Darren, hand me Davy's card." A shuffle around the room and papers flew before Tanner went back to him. "You owe us ten grand. Can't take your action. Pay me half and I'll catch ya next week."

"Hello? Yep. You got him. *I'm your man*. Eagles? Nope. Where ya been? It's the Giants and Cowboys tonight. Giants are four and thirty-six. What can I do you for?"

Ally took it all in. They had come a long way. She had to hand them the credit due they were due. They were small town boys that made good on some big action behind the games.

Computers lined the walls and the notepads they once had stacked up in the corner were now limited to handheld post-it notes. Darren entered the data into desktop documents and the paper evidence was shredded as quickly as he locked in the player's bets.

When she was in high school, they were the go-to guys for local action, but before she left town the calls had started coming in from around the world. They'd hit the big leagues and still managed to operate their business from a two-bedroom apartment. Unsuspecting neighbors had no idea a multi-million dollar business was conducted in their building.

Ally was fourteen when she found out her brothers were involved with Tanner in an illegal gambling ring. Fourteen when she realized the siblings she worshipped were crooks and their best friend had somehow become the love of her life.

It was a hell of a year. It was the year she'd decided that one day Tanner Dorsey would notice her and decide he couldn't live without her. That same year her brothers realized she had a maddening sickness for Tanner and informed her Tanner wouldn't live at all if he decided he felt the same way. So, she flirted, teased him, and dared him whenever she could.

He stayed away. He had good reason. Darren and David were built like gorillas. Then again, Tanner was built like a tank. The six-pack abs and muscular arms were only part of his six-foot-three frame. His body tempted most eager hot blooded females.

He looked at a woman with the seductive ability of a skilled man, but let him open his mouth and that's when the fun really began. He could talk any woman into an orgasm. In fact, he was capable of

generating multiples with a little lip action, or so she'd heard.

His smile molded steel. More than anything else, it inspired even mere virgins to want. She knew from experience. Whenever he looked her way and copped a wicked little smile, Ally had hot heat between her legs. He'd been the source of inspiration behind many wet dreams.

Trying to focus on something other than Tanner's affect on her, Ally returned to the commotion. The phones didn't quit until well after kick-off.

Tanner's cell continued to buzz until after the first score. Her brothers had a pet peeve about taking propositions, but Tanner couldn't stick to the rules. He was a gambler's bookie. He'd bet on anything. He wagered on everything from who carried the ball first to who kicked the extra point. If someone called during a game and wanted play by play action, he was the man with a place for their money.

The boys moved to the living room and prepared to watch the game in more comfortable surroundings. Ally started fidgeting. She wanted to go and wanted to stay. Her brothers would be furious if she dallied there long.

Tanner looked around the room acting like he misplaced something of substantial importance. He rummaged through some notes, picked up the computer printer and continued to look concerned over his loss of nothing in particular. When he picked up a couple of pens and put them back in place, she laughed.

"Gee, must have been important, huh? I think you're getting paranoid by my presence. Maybe you think I'm bugging the place or something." She walked over to the door with a smile still spread across her lips. "I wouldn't dare interrupt the guys. Send them home after the game. Tell them I'll leave a pot of chili on the stove."

Tanner moved toward her with a predator's swagger. "I had fun tonight. Watching you dance

brought back old memories." He took a deep breath. "I always liked holding you in my arms, watching you move."

She searched his eyes in an effort to interpret what she found. The mischief she expected to find wasn't there. She decided it was something else entirely. Flirtation? No. She wanted to compare what she saw in his expression to malice and for good reason. He'd cost her a lot.

Damn him for wasted days and lost time; and to hell with him for giving her too many feelings to sort through all on her own. No. Damn her. She couldn't do anything about him now. She'd made her choices and she had to come to terms with the consequences. It was too late. Too much time passed. Her life had changed. His hadn't. She was on one side of the law and he would always stand on the other.

He stopped just three steps shy of being totally in her face and said, "I want to know why you freaked out on me in the car." He moistened his lips and added, "If all had gone well we could've made out, you know, like a couple of kids without a worry or two, but you gave me the chilly shoulder and I want to know why."

"I didn't." Breathing around Tanner was a special assignment, a blasted task.

Damn him. He was close enough to hear her groan, which she did a lot when she was frustrated. She stayed physically and mentally challenged whenever Tanner was nearby.

"You didn't huh?" His perfect body formed a cage around hers. He placed his palms on either side of her head, supporting his body with the wall behind her. He was undoubtedly the best built man that ever passed through the gates of heaven; only to bring a little hell to those women destined to crave him.

Lust-filled nights had kept her awake more often than not. Frustrated days made her into a nervous wreck. There wasn't a man alive that could please

her. Not one masculine hand that ever turned her on, and now she wasn't even sure Tanner's could.

Ally resented the time she spent wasting away only to have him tell her, right before she left for training as if timing mattered, there would never be an Ally and Tanner. How the hell could something be over when it never began in the first place? She remembered the devastation his words brought and how the memorable pain almost drove her to an unexplainable madness. Fury set in but wanton need soon replaced it right after she saw him again. As always, she longed for him even in the midst of forced denial.

She cleared her throat. "Just tell Darren and David where to find me and let them know I'll have dinner waiting."

He took that extra step. "And what about me? Where do I find you while you're home? Are you staying with the boys or your mother or...?"

What she'd give for an invitation to stay with him. Her head started spinning. She only drank one glass of wine. Now she was acting like a woman in a drunken stupor, ready to spread her legs for the one man she longed to have open them.

"Don't do this," she pleaded.

She should tell Tanner all the reasons why now wouldn't be the best time to start something that should have started a long time ago. She wanted to run out the door but she couldn't make herself. He smelled so damn good and all she wanted was just one kiss. Okay, maybe two or three but he could drop the first one on her dry mouth and they'd go from there.

Her lips parted. She waited.

Tanner towered over her five-foot-four frame. Smiling down on her, he bent his forehead to hers and with a smooth and skilled hand that would have made Don Juan just as proud as punch, he brushed a hair from her cheek with the back of his hand.

*Suave*. She had to hand it to him. He was silky smooth.

"I was scared you wouldn't come back, Ally," he crooned. He was oozing with knowledge. He probably saw the longing and realized she still craved him. Lust was in the air. His just as much as hers.

"I waltzed back into Tennessee hell-bent on getting your attention. So, now I have it. I promise I'll sleep better tonight. You know how I love to win when we play our little games."

It was no secret she carried a torch for him. It also wasn't a secret that he would have climbed into her bed on more than one occasion if her brothers had just turned their heads long enough to allow him to pull back the sheets and yank his pants down. They never did. They weren't about to start now.

She caught a glimpse of something in her peripheral vision and knew they were busted before she heard one of her brother's stern voices.

"What are you two doing over there? Discussing football I hope?" Darren's hard tone imposed his damning rules all over again.

Ally's better judgment returned. Well, not really, she reached out and grabbed some element of self-control once she heard Darren.

The one with the perpetual smirk backed away from her. "Yep, man, you got that right. We're discussing plays over here." His gaze cut toward Darren and then swerved back to her. "Ally, the next move is yours."

Darren snickered before he left the room with a piece of cheese in one hand and a beer in the other. "Careful what you wish for there, buddy."

Her brother left them alone, which was remarkable. His disappearance was one for the record books. Either the game was tight or maybe he just wasn't in the mood to run interference. Maybe like her, he'd grown tired of the Tanner and Ally saga.

Tanner held onto her with a lingering, nearly appreciative gaze. "Guess what I've wished for, Ally? Since the next play is yours, I'm going to tell you.

"I'm cheering for you, baby doll. I want that touchdown, and if you don't get to movin', I may run my best offense on your little ass." He sighed and then added, "I don't care who is standing by to tell me it's the wrong play. I'm gonna make it anyway. You understand what I'm saying, don't you?"

Now she acknowledged the hunger, the overwhelming need to pounce on his cute little ass. She'd fought desire at the club. She'd denied him in the car. She resisted him on the way up the steps to the apartment and she'd just about escaped unscathed. Then, he pulled out all the stops.

Ally flipped her long strawberry blonde hair over her shoulders. "Well, thank goodness you let me in on your plans because just like you Tanner, I can run like hell." She opened the door and shot him a flirty little wink. "And this time, I will."

## Chapter Three

Ally was in the kitchen throwing things. She tossed everything she could into a pot. An unopened can of tomatoes, a whole onion, a small plastic bottle of ketchup. She stopped in her tracks and called out in frustration. "What am I doing?"

Darren slammed the pantry door and slid by her. "The real question here is: what took you so long to come back?"

She peered into the large pot. "I thought you guys wouldn't be here until after the game."

"Good thing I came home when I did. It looks like you've forgotten how to cook." He loved teasing her. "You wash and chop the veggies. As for the cans, you may want to open them. David and I haven't acquired a taste for metal while you've been away."

"You're such the clown tonight, huh?"

Darren sat down at the kitchen table. "Why *are you here?*" His voice was steady. He knew her so well.

"Can't your sister come for a visit? Do I have to have a reason to come home?"

"Ally, he's not worth it."

"Who?"

"Don't mess around, Ally. I'm being serious here. You can't get over him and you've come back for him. Don't waste your time. He'll destroy you and everything you've worked for."

Ally retrieved a knife from the kitchen drawer. She couldn't look at him. Darren thought he knew her but this time, he was wrong. Wasn't he?

She released a troubled sigh as she deliberately chopped an onion. Her eyes burned. *Damn onions.* She wished like hell she was alone and then she'd just go with it. Have a long overdue cry.

Darren pressed forward. "You know that saying. There are women you bed and women you take home to mama?"

Ally laughed. "Well, it goes something like that I guess." She picked up a transparent sliver and tossed the outer peeling his way.

"Yeah, something like that." He continued, "Honey, Tanner's our best friend. He's a good guy, but damn Ally, he's no good for a woman and you know it."

She put the knife down and walked over to claim the chair opposite Darren. "Tell me something, why is it that you and David always made your own choices? You pursued the girls you wanted, the dreams you wanted to chase, the life you wanted to live. Yet you never wanted me to do the same. Why?"

Darren slammed his palm against the table. "We wanted you safe! Don't you realize that? That's all we ever wanted. Ally, honey, you have no idea what you'll have on your hands if you get Tanner Dorsey. No idea at all."

Tears threatened to spill so she bowed her head, choosing instead to watch her hands form a steeple. She thought long and hard before she lifted her gaze to tell him her would-be truths. "Darren, you're right, I'm here for a reason but it has nothing to do with Tanner."

"You're a liar."

"No, I'm not. In fact, if you want honesty, I'll give you a good dose." She paused as she glanced around the kitchen. All the cat and mouse games she'd played with Tanner often began right there. The memories tore through her heart.

"A year ago, I pursued Tanner. I wanted him to tell me something, give me anything he could, promise me a future or something. I had to know."

"And?"

"He gave me more than I ever bargained for," she said regrettably.

"Then I'll kill the little bastard." Darren stood up with anger in his eyes and fists clenched at his sides.

She grabbed his forearm. "Sit down. It's not what you think."

"Did he hurt you?" Brewing anger continued to burn with effectiveness. His face was red and his neck veins, bulged.

Yes, he hurt her. He tore her heart out and threw her away. He destroyed her. "No," she lied. "He did exactly what you wanted him to." She frowned. "He did what he always planned to do, I guess. He let me go."

Darren crossed his arms thoughtfully. "I'm sorry. I really am."

A snickered grunt, if there was such a thing, slipped from her lips. A steady stream of tears drifted down her cheeks. "I imagine you are, but you still got what you wanted. He told me to go and not look back. He said if I was looking at him, hoping to find a reason to stay, I could stop gawking. So I did what he told me to do. I left and haven't looked back." She swallowed hard and was about to let the misery she'd felt over a year ago consume her when her phone rang.

She walked over to the kitchen counter and retrieved her purse. "This is Ally." She sniffed into the receiver which she shouldn't have done. She was an agent with the FBI and her demeanor, not to mention the way she answered the phone, showed weakness.

She coughed, struggling to breathe after she heard the raspy voice of her caller.

"Okay. Okay. Where?" By the time the last "okay" fell from her lips, she appeared to have found some inner strength. She closed her phone and tucked it back inside her purse.

"We'll finish here later." She meant the conversation. The chili, he could manage. She bent down to rummage through a duffle bag she left by the door. She came up with a revolver and a sweater.

"What the fuck?" Darren eyed the gun.

"Not for you big brother. Although, I could hold you at gunpoint and ask you to finish dinner while I'm gone."

Worry creased his brow. "If you think I'm going to let my little sister take a phone call and then walk out of here with a pistol in her hand, you got another think coming."

Ally shoved the gun in her waistband, tucking it securely in the small of her back. She dug into her bag in search of ammunition. She was good, going out of her way to set up the stage perfectly. She pulled out a box of bullets and fingered the plastic case, tapping nails on the container holding several rounds of firing power.

"Agent Ally Stephens, FBI." She teased, sticking out her hand and waiting on a handshake.

Darren pulled her into an embrace. "I had hoped I'd never have to see you like this. Be careful out there."

She smiled weakly but turned away. She didn't need her lying eyes telling a well known story. She was going to meet the man she loved.

\* \* \* \*

Ally approached with caution. There wasn't any movement straight ahead. Her head was a little fuzzy from all the possible scenarios. She couldn't think about those. She refused to acknowledge her building doubt. That was the intelligence agent surfacing.

She walked deeper into the night, allowing the sounds and shadows of the black field to draw her in. The night critters were alive and crickets surrounded her, singing their most annoying song. Lightening bugs provided enough flashes here and there to light one hell of a frightening path. Ally knew the familiar road to no where but couldn't stop herself from pressing forward.

Looking around, the agent in her assessed the dark and open setting. She knew the place well. She'd spent her summers there watching from the

bleachers while her brothers and Tanner ran bases or tossed sunflower seeds on the dirty floor of the dugout.

She heard a whistle and stopped dead in her tracks. He must've raced her there. She took a deep breath and waited. An owl hooted at her back. Sure enough, he was in the dugout, just as she'd suspected.

Approaching with frustration on her heels more than anticipation, she opened the tall wire-strewn gate and pushed through the opening with a swing of her hip. There he was. His legs were outstretched and crossed at the ankles. The seeds were already flying here and there.

"I was beginning to think you weren't going to show up." He threw a few seeds her way and grinned. "Cold feet?"

"Hardly, Tanner."

"I thought you might not show."

"Hmm...I bet." He probably realized she had counted down the seconds until he called.

"What took you so long? Darren didn't want to let you out of the house? What did you tell him?"

"Got a lot on your mind Tanner? The interrogation becomes you."

He threw the package down and stood up. "Yeah, baby. I've had a lot ideas shaking around in my head for several years now. It's just time you heard all about what's on my mind."

She noticed the dark lust brooding in his eyes. "This was a mistake."

"No. I take the blame and carry plenty. I should've never pushed you away. I was one foolish man to let you go." His gaze drifted over her. "Look at you. Any man stupid enough to run from you should rot in his own hell. Believe me; I've been there and back. Shook hands with the devil too. Sank into a deep depression that nearly killed me. Bet Darren didn't tell you that did he?"

Ally studied him. Was this Tanner playing her or trying to come clean? She couldn't tell. "You sent me packing more times than I can count. I haven't forgotten it, Tanner. I told you exactly how I felt and you threw me away like I was nothing to you. You didn't leave anything to chance. You assured me you weren't interested. Let's see, how did you put it exactly? Oh that's right, you said I was like the smallest of splinters that you caught in your ass while sitting on a bench. An irritation you didn't know how to get rid of, and now that I think about it, it's kind of ironic you called me out here. You know?"

"Don't do this now, Ally," he warned her. "You've chased my ass for years and I swear, I'll spank yours if you don't sit down and listen to me."

She deliberately narrowed her eyes, daring him. Aware he could overpower her if he decided he wanted her to. "Tanner, what do you want from me? I've been here and done this, remember?"

Tanner called her out when she turned eighteen with a promise of great adventures. He'd given her a kiss on the cheek.

A year earlier, he met her at the dugout so he could let her down gently, only he'd chosen to break her heart. No, correction, shatter it beyond repair. Each time he'd taken something from her. Each time he'd left her with less of herself.

Tanner studied his clasped hands dropped between his legs. He reached for her, pulling her forward. She stood in between his splayed legs and suddenly felt very vulnerable.

"What do I want from you?" He watched her with knowing eyes ready to spill lots of personal truths. "I don't want anything from you." He took her right hand and placed it on his left shoulder, carefully moving the left one on his right. "I just want you. All of you, Ally. I want you to give me everything you have to give and I want to give you the same—without reservations, without the threat of someone out there ready to disapprove, just me and just you."

That's all I want. And if that's too much to ask, then let me do all the work and let me just have you."

Her labored breathing caught in her chest. Then, she ceased to breathe at all. Maybe she wasn't even alive anymore. Maybe that's why she felt so euphoric. Had she heard him correctly? And if she had, why wasn't he laughing now? How come he was looking at her with so much sincerity? Why did he look at her like a man looked at his lover?

Wiggling free, Ally turned her head. There had to be a punch line somewhere. He had to be spewing his brazen lies. "It's too late. I don't want you anymore." And she had to guard her heart.

Wow, she thought. That felt damn good.

She held her head high and with a free hand, released her ponytail. Freed curls fell against her face. She gave him a cold stare, realizing this was where she'd get the slap in the face and become the butt of Tanner's jokes.

Her cool and kosher don't-fuck-with-me attitude served her well when she dealt with hardened criminals. Apparently, she caught Tanner off his guard. He frowned. His eyes watered, moisture pooling in the corners.

She took a step back but didn't move fast enough. Tanner grabbed her arm, stood, and pressed her back to the web of fencing behind them, an act that reminded her of the many challenges he represented. The way he seemed to imprison her with one look or an involuntary reaction was telling. She wasn't ready to leave him. Regardless of what she told herself, she belonged to him.

To make matters worse, there was something different about Tanner tonight. He was darker, more determined, and quite ambitious in his pursuit of her. Tanner acted as if he was willing to stop playing his childish games.

Well too bad. It was too late. Right?

"Move, damn you."

"I like it rough, Ally. You ought to know that. Don't make me take what I already know you want to give me." He watched her like he could eat her up right there.

He moved his lower body into her more pivotal point. The hard-on he brushed against her felt like a bolt of lightening struck her center. Lightening never strikes the same place twice, she told herself. Only, she lied. He pushed against her again and this time, the heat was sensationalized. Sweet fuck, had she ever been more aware of a man, of the pleasures he could offer, of the pain he could soothe?

*Breathe in. Breathe out.*

The man she'd always loved was about to plant a kiss on her lips and if he did, she would lose her objective, her focus, and her...oh damn!

Hot and ravenous lips covered her very receptive mouth. His tongue and teeth did things to her no other man attempted. Slow and tantalizing, his kiss deepened, roughened a bit but then softened just enough.

Tender, sweet, and delicious; he was her everything all over again. He must have been famished. His mouth tore her entire world apart.

Her lower half reacted in a way she didn't know how to handle. She ground against him, unable to stop herself from pressing forward, feeling as much of his rigid length as humanly possible through clothing barriers. Damn it to hell, she wanted to hike up her skirt and just beg him to take what she offered, pull out his dick, and just go.

God, she'd lost it.

He caressed the side of her breast, stopping for a second. "Oh Ally, sweet Ally, I knew you'd taste hot and sweet just like the morning sun." His hands continued moving, smoothing over her curves, hugging and squeezing her hips, grunting through a curled lip.

"Don't stop me, Ally. God help me, don't you stop this," he rasped, grabbing her ass and lifting her

to him, wrapping her legs around his waist. "I've waited so long for you, baby." One sweet kiss was offered and then he devoured her whole, licking his way through the seam of her lips.

She ached for his touch, longed for more than she'd ever had before.

She was wet, aroused. Good grief, she could've ridden his covered cock right then and there. She wanted to come apart in his arms, if he'd only let her.

His lips moved across her cheek in slow motion and he nuzzled her. Oh God, she thought. *No. No. No.* The pain was coming. They were plummeting toward the end and while she didn't want this to stop she saw the forever she wouldn't have in his sorrow-filled eyes. If he took her now, he'd still let her go and then what would she have? What would he leave her with—memories of a good time?

He paused long enough to whisper, nipping at words as easily as he sipped at her ear. "I know you've waited for me. I *watched* you wait for me, Ally."

*What? What was that?* She shoved him away. "What did you say?"

Tanner moved his forefinger to her lips. "*Your secret is safe with me.* I won't tell a soul."

Ally swallowed over and over again. There was absolutely no way he could know she still had her virginity. No way whatsoever, or was there?

Ally studied him for a solid minute. His lips curved in a smile and he took the pad of his thumb across his bottom lip. The cocky attitude returned at once. "I know you're as pure as a first winter snow. I *know*, Ally."

Oh she was mad and as the anger consumed her, another thought crossed her mind. He'd been spying on her. She slapped his rock hard chest. "You are one piece of work Tanner Dorsey, an arrogant masterpiece, a true work of art! You're nothing but a...but a self-serving prick! That's what you are!"

"Now, hang on there, Ally. What did I do this time?" His eyes danced in amusement and the wanton look of compelling desire washed away as quickly as it made its original appearance

"You know what you've done. You know damn well what you said!"

"That you're a virgin? You bet I know. It's my business to know." His face was stamped with obvious satisfaction.

She opened her mouth but nothing came out. Finally, she moved around him, darting toward the gate. "You don't know shit." She quickly made her way to the fence. She had to get out of there. She was mad. Evil thoughts ran rampant. She wanted to kill him. She also wanted to fuck him. Forget that, she mused. She always had those thoughts and lived with them, worked around what she now gauged as a possible lifelong problem. Other men surely had the same initiatives to do the dirty deed. She just needed to go find another one. The kind that knew how to keep his damn mouth shut and his goons away from her place!

"I know all about you, Ally. I always have," he called out. "You can convince yourself that you can walk away. You may even think that I'll let you go again, but search your heart, Ally! We both know better."

He was coming up from behind her. God help her, she had to get out of there. She was so embarrassed. She had been such a blatant idiot!

When she heard the gravel crunching under his shoes, she cried out, "Leave me alone!"

"Fine, go head. Run home. You won't feel any better later on tonight when you're lying there alone in your room wishing you had me between your legs instead of that vibrator. You know the one. You keep it in your nightstand back in Florida. I think it's purple, if I'm not mistaken."

The words stung her. She stopped abruptly and turned around. "You bastard!" She raised her hand to

strike him, knowing all along her palm wouldn't connect with his cheek.

Tanner's dark eyes followed hers. She looked around the ballpark exasperated. Her arm rose and fell. Her hand slapped against her thigh. "So it's come down to this?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't let you go."

"You had no right, Tanner," she cried out. "No right. This isn't normal. *We* aren't normal!"

"So we're a little bit crazy," he said, sniffing. "Can I help how I feel about you?"

She pursed her lips. She didn't know how to respond.

"Ally, I can't stop myself. I wanted to keep an eye on you." His voice broke and at the same time, his demeanor changed, the humor emerging as if he'd called for comic relief by name. "I know all about your vices. Of course it's only fair to warn you, I may not have as many different speeds as your little toy but I'm just as big not to mention hard. Well, here," he said, taking her hand in his, "why don't you feel around for yourself."

Ally yanked her arm away. "You fucking prick! Damn it Tanner! Enough! I've had enough!" She stormed away from the gate and then back again. She cocked her hip and rested her hand in the curve of her waist, waving him off with a middle finger waving in the air at the same time. "Fuck you, Tanner. Where do you get off going through my things? Where?"

Her tantrum was probably heard all the way to Middle Tennessee. And forget about Knoxville, after her fury had the best of her, the whole damn town probably knew about her little toy too.

She was raging furious. Blue-hot anger whipped around her sending her into a blinding rage. Not only did she see red, she saw blood and she wanted Tanner to shed a little so he'd feel her pain and humiliation.

After marching up and down the field throwing her arms around her head like a crazy woman, she stopped. Just dead in her tracks, she came to a sudden halt. The truth had a way of putting people in their place. Ally's practically ran her over.

"You've been in my apartment? When I wasn't home? You've invaded my personal space? Gone through my things?" The reality of it dealt a huge blow. She marched right up to him with both hands on her hips. "Why would you do that? What kind of sick prick are you?"

"You got that part right." He looked down and then back up again. "But there's a way to cure me." He glared up from under hooded eyes, those that would never let her run from him, not this time. "And you're not a lost cause either. I'm the only one who can fix you Ally."

"I don't need to be fixed!" She huffed. She hated when she did that. Her vocal expressions only proved she believed she couldn't win. She stormed away again and then back but she couldn't form the first syllable so she stamped her foot like a child. A cloud of dust rose from the ground. "Damn you!"

"Ally, go ahead, curse me. When I heard you were working for the FBI, I couldn't help myself. I had to put someone on you. I wanted to be sure you were always protected."

Oh now, *now* he'd gone too far. "*You did what?*" She rushed him glaring at him through a moist film covering her pupils, not from the unexpected hurt but from a temper ready to explode into a fit of well-provoked eruption.

"I put someone on you. I didn't stutter. I put a crew of guys on your place and you never realized they were there. End of story."

"No! It isn't the end of the story."

"Yeah Ally, it pretty much is," he said. "Besides, I'm not going to apologize."

Her arms flew around everywhere. "I'll have to talk to you about this some other time. I can't

believe you would do this! You've gone too far and this time Tanner Dorsey--listen to me--*your* obsession *with me* will bite *you* in the ass!"

He let her walk by without reaching for her. She'd almost made it to the gate when she heard him. "Ah, hell Ally. Don't you know how I feel about you by now? I can push you away but my heart won't leave you alone. I wanted to keep you safe."

Her body went rigid. She couldn't face him.

For once, she really didn't think she could look him in the eye. God, did he have any idea what he'd done? She wanted him to understand the magnitude of what he'd set in motion and he needed to listen to her, hear her loud and clear.

She cleared her throat and with a diabolical tone she barely recognized as her own, she glanced over her shoulder and said, "Tanner, if you wanted me safe, you would've never sent your guys. You would've come for me yourself. You just wanted to stroke your ego. I hope the hard-on you wear around for me was worth the target you now wear on your back. See, I'm pretty sure your swollen dick just got you in a heap of trouble."

## Chapter Four

Ally dialed her voice mail.

"You have three new messages. Two saved messages."

She hit one to retrieve.

"Hey Ally, we've got a problem. Call me at 488-555-4242. I'm waiting to hear from you. Hope to hear from you soon."

"Ally. Steve. Call me 555-4242. It's important."

"Agent Stephens this is Marcel Fernandez with Internal Affairs. I think we may need to sit down and talk. Give me a call when you can please at 488-555-4242." *Shit.* It was the same number Steve had left earlier. Her troubles were piling up by the minute.

Tanner was such a control freak. He obviously didn't know the Feds would've tagged him or his crew early on. She'd been used for bait and now damn them all, she was out there on a thin limb, one threatening to snap and break at any moment.

She dialed the number and took a deeply troubled breath. "This is Agent Ally Stephens. May I please speak to..."

"Agent Stephens? Yes, Marcel Fernandez. We need to talk and I'd like to do that tonight. Let's meet over on the Riverfront. It's close to the stadium so you won't have any trouble finding it. In fact, it's not far from the ballpark you know so well. I believe you were there earlier this evening."

Yep, Tanner had done it this time. Thanks to his jealous nature, he had one of the biggest assholes hot on his trail. Marcel didn't quit and neither did Tanner. This was a disaster waiting to happen.

She tried to reassure herself. *The best men always win.* Only she knew better. This time Tanner faced the kind of guy he and her brothers once feared. And unless Ally did something to stop him,

Marcel Fernandez would get his men, or at least, the man Ally would always love.

\* \* \* \*

About an hour later, Ally pulled into the vacated parking lot of one of Knoxville's finest restaurants and slid from behind the wheel, slamming the car door behind her. The smell of smoked sausage and grilled shrimp still lingered in the air and her stomach growled, reminding her of the dinner she missed. What she'd give to be sitting at the kitchen table eating a fine cup of soup about right then.

She looked out over the water and wondered what her life might have been like if she hadn't joined the FBI. Would she and Tanner already be living together, perhaps raising a family and having a few kids along the way? Would she be working with Tanner and her brothers or would they do everything in their power to keep her out of their business and safely tucked away in order to guarantee her safety?

A car with one headlight missing raced around the building and skid to a stop just a few feet away from where she stood. She quickly drew the gun stashed in her belt, going for the weapon on instinct and taking the stance of an agent prepared to draw and use the weapon she aimed.

Marcel Fernandez stepped out of the car with his hands high. "It's me, Fernandez." He reached for his badge and flashed it.

"I know who you are." He was a snake. She recognized him and men like him anywhere. How Marcel Fernandez ended up as a supervisor for the FBI's Internal Affairs Division was anyone's guess. How he ended up being in charge of her current operation was up for even further debate. That is, until Tanner provided all the answers she needed.

"So he bit."

"Who? What are you talking about?" The obvious confusion came through in her voice.

"Tanner Dorsey." She heard a voice behind her and quickly looked over her shoulder. Special Agent

Steve Whitehead took careful steps when he approached her.

"Steve. Good to see you. I didn't know you'd be here." She should have expected as much. Everywhere she went, she ran into him sooner or later. They were on a special team trying to crack open a case that involved drugs, gambling rings, prostitution and murder-for-hire. A new cartel, one said to be operated by several thugs from the south, made La Cosa Nostra look like child's play.

"I try to keep my eye on you," Steve said, grinning.

Fernandez gave her a quick once over, studying her body language like a science and apparently never concerning himself with whether or not she suspected he had her under a scrutinized eye of suspicion. Fernandez possessed a reputation for being one cool cat. He was stealthy, cold, meticulous, and damn good at his job. He moved toward Ally slowly, propping his closed fist under his chin and folding an arm over his chest to support his elbow. "Did it ever occur to you why you were chosen for this job?"

She looked at Steve who only shrugged. "Because my credentials are solid. I'm the best one for this particular assignment. I have experience and contacts. You wanted someone who could do the job quickly, effectively and..."

"Cut the bull shit, Stephens." Fernandez waved his hand and began his prance—what a lot of the women agents called Marcel's notorious strut. And Lord have mercy, he was one man with plenty of swagger.

Fernandez wasn't just easy on the eyes; he was a pleasure to the skin. Not that she knew from experience, thank goodness. She'd been warned early on. Marcel wasn't her type but at times, when she was lonely, she'd considered options from the office. She couldn't help but notice Fernandez and his harem.

As far as Ally could tell, she must've been one of the few female Special Agents who hadn't slipped into the man's bed. When he walked, he strutted with pure confidence. His smile was downright wicked, one a woman wanted to see spread a little wider when it mattered most. He was a manly-man; rugged, handsome and just a damn pleasure to watch, at least for the most part. Ally loved to see him in action, watch his wheels turn. But at the moment, she wasn't impressed. And for the first time in her life, she was afraid.

"Let's chat, Ally." Fernandez was in her face for longer than what she considered comfortable. She smelled a hint of scotch on his breath. Of course, she couldn't say that she blamed him. It was after hours. He was off the clock and didn't appear drunk. Maybe he had a sip or two waiting for her call.

She shifted her weight and studied Steve, the only man who almost climbed in bed with her on numerous occasions just because the chemistry was there. Something always held them back and that something was Tanner. Steve apparently knew the reason behind her lame excuses now. His empty cold glare told large tales of things to come.

"What do you want from me, Fernandez?"

"I want Tanner Dorsey and I want your brothers. How soon should I expect them?" He chuckled before he issued a condescending pat on the back.

The pit of her gut rumbled in agonizing pain. Had someone kicked her there? She could have offered a sworn statement that they had. Her heart slammed against her chest cavity.

She had the good sense to keep her mouth shut but without saying anything at all, she probably looked like she wanted to protect her brothers and Tanner. She pursed her lips and tried to sum up what Fernandez possibly knew. She swung her gaze toward Steve. What had he witnessed for himself? Had he followed her to the ballpark earlier? Had he been at Jake's hiding in one of the club's dark corners?

"See, Ally, or is it Special Agent Stephens?" Fernandez laughed before continuing, "I can't seem to remember which name you prefer these days. After all, who would've thought you could've waltzed into the FBI and secured a job considering how well connected you are to Dorsey and of course, your own brothers. I have to hand it to you. With your family ties secured in the underworld, you pulled off the impossible."

Her eyes darted back and forth between men, agents who looked like angry fellows. Their disapproval and resentment showed in their expressions.

Did they believe one of their own betrayed them and the sanctity of what the agency stood for? If so, how did she prove to them they had it all wrong? *Did* they have it all wrong?

Either way, she wouldn't convince them right then of which side of the law she supported. Maybe even she wasn't sure which side of the fence she wanted to stand on, especially if it meant turning her back on the only people she loved. Besides, the pastures she came from had always been green, richer still after she fell in love with Tanner Dorsey. How did a woman walk away from that? Was it even possible?

Fernandez paced. "Nothing to say?"

"What do you want from me? You seem to have everything figured out. You're forgetting one thing though. There's a significant age difference between me and my brothers. I don't know what they do in their spare time."

"How about in their daily lives, what do they do day in and day out? Got any inclination about that?" Steve wasn't going to let her off easy. He acted like a scorned lover and Steve was the kind of man who resented the hell out of the thugs making good on a life of crime.

Knowing Steve, he followed her to the club, or worse, to the baseball field. There, he wouldn't have

been able to ignore the obvious. There was an undeniable, uncontrollable, maybe even dark fascination linking Tanner and Ally together, ensuring they were two people destined to keep coming back for more.

Ally recognized the corner she'd been backed into. She was in a difficult place, a very tough predicament, but one she might be able to handle in due time.

Early in life, Tanner had taught her how to cope with the element of surprise. His words buzzed in her ears. *When caught off guard learn to listen. If all else fails ask a few questions but never, ever answer someone interrogating you. You never know who might be listening or worse, who might take a few notes.*

"Tell me what you know about Dorsey and then we'll work on your brothers." Fernandez lived up to his reputation. He didn't mess around. He went right in for the kill.

It was up to her. She had to protect Tanner and her brothers.

Fernandez could drag information from the lips of dying men and never feel bad about it if the one dying used his last sip of life to give him information. Ruthless, cold-hearted and possessed with a damn sharp mind, most of their own kind considered him armed and dangerous even in his sleep.

"Agent Stephens? I'm asking you a question. I'd like to know what you can tell me about Dorsey."

Her phone rang. She walked over to the car, leaned in and pulled the pocket model from her purse. She realized who was on the other end long before the caller ID confirmed her worst fears. "This is Stephens."

"Hey, can I come over? I need to talk to you. We've fought this thing between us for far too long. What do you say? Give a poor guy a chance, will ya?"

Hearing his voice right at that moment was like opening up a fresh wound. She almost gasped when

she heard him. *Oh Tanner, what have you done? What on earth have you done?*

She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry about that. Did I leave the stove on? Do me a favor and go check. I'll be there shortly. No need to worry. I just left in a hurry." She snapped the phone shut before Tanner fired back with a few questions.

She discreetly hit the off-button and tossed her phone in the front seat of her vehicle. "I'm not telling you anything about my brothers." She paused and took a deep breath. "Or Tanner." She spoke with finality, standing firm behind the choices she made, taking conviction in the fact that for love of career or money, a person never turned their back on their family. "If you think I'm too close to this then pull me off the case. I'll go back to Florida tomorrow and that will be that."

Fernandez blew up, or at least, he might as well have. His veins bulged pulsing with his building anger. His face turned beet red. "Like hell you will! You've already jeopardized us enough. If you think you're going to run back to where the sun is always said to rise and shine the brightest, consider who you work for darlin'. Welcome to the FBI. We hope you like it here." He grated back a few curse words, muttering to himself in the process.

Pointing and shaking his index finger he came right back. This time, he pressed the tip of his finger against her chest for effect. "I haven't gotten where I am by letting someone like you turn the other cheek when family is involved. Everyone comes from somewhere, Ally. Many of us have skeletons in our family closets. We just do what we can to be sure their blood is the only thing we share. And if it isn't, we drain enough to keep the red stains from tainting everything we touch in life. You better choose, Ally. Decide which side of the law you're on or so help me God, when I finish with your brothers and Dorsey, I'll come looking for you.

"Let's get out of here, Steve. If I were a betting man, I'd bet high stakes Dorsey is heading over to Ally's house now. I wouldn't want to hold her up. They probably have a lot of unfinished business."

Steve followed Fernandez but stopped long enough to offer a few harsh words too: "While you were keeping that tight little pussy all wrapped up in an intimate little package, your boyfriend's goons were spying on you. I really hope you didn't know Dorsey's men were always there, tailing you, sweeping your apartment, and stalking your men friends. I hope you didn't, Ally. If I find out otherwise, so help me, I'll make it my mission to see you behind bars right along with those thugs you call brothers."

Parting words stunned her. Ally latched onto Steve's fury and possessed his anger as her own. She had no doubts where she planned to release her own share of angst, her growing animosity. She found new determination and as soon as she put to rest one minor little detail, Tanner Dorsey would pay hell.

## Chapter Five

Ally was seething. The day's events played out again and again. Over and over, she heard the words exchanged with Marcel and Steve. They pounded in the back of her skull like a blunt object, just irritating the fuck out of her.

Oh boy, she was going to clean Tanner's plow. But first, she was going to fuck him.

Having sex with Tanner was the only way to solve her dilemma. The fact she'd never had the only man she truly wanted placed her at an extreme disadvantage. She lost her ability to think rationally so she had to take sex out of the equation. Romancing the man she loved was a must-do if she ever hoped to find peace of mind.

She waited for him in the lobby. The atrium feature of the Alcoa Highway Hilton housed a popular Knoxville bar, but unfortunately the staff had already closed up for the night. After twelve, they didn't see a lot of action there. The only people remaining nursed their last few sips of a watered-down drink, probably hoping to steal away a few forgettable moments with a stranger.

Ally studied a few couples still loitering around their tables. How hopeless and desperate could someone be in order to bang a stranger? She pondered that for a moment longer. She'd had a few of those close calls with Steve but he was safe and familiar.

Tanner strolled through the double doors and her eyes moistened when she saw him. As soon as he made eye contact, she let out a sigh of relief, but it was short lived. When his lips turned up in a wicked grin, her heart stopped. He most definitely had the same goals and objectives she did.

Her leather designer bag was tossed over one shoulder and a large suitcase trailed behind him. She watched him move across the tile floor and then rounded a half-partition wall and headed straight for him.

A few seconds later, they met at the elevator. They stepped in at the same time and five floors later, they stepped out.

Tanner was quiet and the silence was maddening, but words couldn't stop where they were headed. Sure, she was still mad as hell. Thanks to his bloody ridiculous stunt, he'd left her no other choice but to tear down his organization. But first; she was going to take what had always belonged to her. She would know what it felt like to have Tanner Dorsey in between her legs.

The keycard worked. Thank heavens for small miracles. The way her luck had been, anything was possible. The plastic card slid in place and a click-click sound unlocked the door. And just like that, a world of possibilities opened right up.

Tanner dropped everything just inside the door of one very large executive suite. He was a smart man. She was a very anxious woman. Unpacking could wait.

"We don't have much time," she said in a husky voice.

He took her in his arms and pulled her against him. "This is going to take all night and then some."

"Tanner..." Her whisper revealed her need, but hopefully not her desperation. Even if she had no interest in taking him to bed, she would've still met him there. She'd tell him about the nightmare they faced, the hellish storm waiting just beyond their time together.

Lust filled his eyes when he held her in his arms. "I'm going to love you straight through the night." He held her in a piercing gaze, teasing her with a sinful lower body grind. He rubbed against her, taunting her with his size, rubbing his penis against her center.

She draped her arms over his shoulders, lavishing him with a kiss only meant to guide them closer to the carnal pleasures they'd long since left unsatisfied. Lust rolled over her like a violent wave in a tumultuous storm. She pressed her tongue through the seam of his lips, plunging into the depths of his mouth and feasting off their kiss like she'd never have the opportunity to take another.

She'd never kissed with such passion. Then again she'd never kissed with much intent.

Men came and went in her life and most wanted to fuck her. She had opportunity but just because chances came at a dime a dozen didn't mean she looked for bargains at half the value.

Ally had waited because she only wanted Tanner and in that moment, she was satisfied with her decision. He was the worth the wait and she believed that. Oh God yes, she believed he was worth the wait.

"So I finally get to make those *Tanner does me* dreams come true?" He played with her hair, pushing long strands over her shoulders. He leaned back, pulling away from her long enough to study her face. "Well?"

She kissed him again, this time leaving pecks here and there. "Do me a favor. Don't talk. Please. Just kiss me. Don't open your mouth and ruin this." She begged with a well warranted plea but he bargained for more.

"Oh but honey, I'll open my mouth on you in places you'll never want me to leave. That's a solemn promise." His eyes danced and then he began his pursuit of fulfilling all he'd ever promised and then some.

The kiss he first took was hungry, dominant. His body moved into her with slow skill but forced speed control. He was dying to rip her clothes from her and she sensed it when he backed away from her, making an apparent effort to regroup and regain his self-

control. The way he responded to her made her crazy, made her want.

He caught one wrist and moved it high above her head while wrapping his hand around the other one, leaving them palm to palm. Clutching her hand, he slid it up the wall to meet the other. He clamped both wrists locking her under his firm grip.

She was his and knowing Tanner, he wanted to be damn sure she knew he could do just about anything he wanted. She was at his mercy and whatever he wanted, he would take and she would willingly surrender.

In fact, she gladly consented.

Tanner tilted her chin up in a firm hold but she couldn't look at him. What if he asked her about the sudden rush to meet? What if he demanded answers just like she certainly would have expected from him? What if...

He would.

"Open your eyes, pretty lady." Tanner's voice held that primal fear. The kind of eerie tone that would make many women shiver under him but Ally knew what it held for her. A moment of truth, a form of questioning she wasn't sure she could endure.

His lips moved across hers in a light feathery move meant to tease her. She wanted to capture them, grab onto his lower lip and ease him back for a more meaningful lock but he wouldn't allow her the opportunity. Another peck here and one more there, his lips traced her jaw and then under her chin before working their way back up again.

Her eyes opened and closed once more.

"Now then." He kissed both lids before planting one on the tip of her nose. "You're going to tell me where you've been. And..." He slid his hand down to the band of her skirt running his finger back and forth, back and forth before he finally spoke again. "Then, I'll give you what you want. What you've always wanted." His voice was raspy, sexy, and downright scandalous.

Reluctantly, she came to her senses. *The nerve of him.* She felt the agony of defeat, the building sexual frustrations reminding her that she really was there, in that moment, because she'd waited on him for years. "Oh no you don't. You don't get to decide here." Her voice didn't sound like her own. "Shut up and kiss me."

He snickered for just a second. Maybe not even that long before he gave her one, long, deep, soulful kiss. "Baby, I'm not only going to kiss you, but I'm going to put a smile on that pretty little face that you'll never be able to hide again but only after you come clean with me."

She puckered up and waited.

He ignored her and continued. "You tell me where you were and what had you so upset that you couldn't even go home to get your luggage?"

A satisfied grin marked its permanent place on his face. He raked his thumb back and forth across his lower lip. "You taste incredible by the way." A groan later and he was even more determined.

The way he touched her, the way he tasted her when their lips met, proved controlling her would come easy for him. Nothing changed just because he planned to fuck her. He thought he had all the time in the world and he planned to take it.

"Cocky ass." Ally moved by him grabbing the handles to the duffle bag while giving it a short fling to the bed. She reached mad-mode and her mouth was a motorized weapon. "You are nothing but a common tease."

"I'm anything but a tease, I can promise you that." He looked her up and down with starvation pumping through his veins. The bulge in between his legs wasn't the only clue. His voice projected true need. Something she'd never heard before but decidedly loved.

She started pulling things out of her bag slamming each piece of clothing on the bed in a half-hearted attempt to ignore the building lust, practically driving

her to madness. "You were always so confident every woman in town wanted to fuck your ass."

"They did and some of them even got to do it."

That one stung.

He immediately saw the hurt apparently. He reached for her but she slapped him away. "Oh no you don't, you don't get to do that now. You don't get to push me away and then pull me back. Go offer your stud services to someone else."

"That's Mr. Stud to you." He owned the rights to a superior male ego. "I guess the only way to shut you up is to feed you a good dose of what you've been missing."

She was clearly agitated and so what if it showed. "You know, you just can't keep doing this to me. I've waited for your ass for so long that it hurts. Physically *hurts*." She fought the tears threatening to fall. If the tears came, she'd probably just curl up in the bed and cry herself to sleep. She needed a good cry. In fact, she needed a long peaceful sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Tanner inched closer, cautiously, as if he was entering a war zone. She flung a shirt at him. "Hang this up." Then she continued. "You know, you are so stupid. You should've just fucked me but no, you couldn't do that. You wanted to talk so you sure as hell better be a good listener." She tossed a few more items on the bed and then bent over the bag in search of something of substantial value.

"Whatcha lookin for baby girl?" His voice gave him away. He was all about monkey business if it came at her expense.

"Where is it?" She stormed over to his bag and opened it. She didn't see what she needed, at least not at first.

"Where's what?"

Through gritted teeth, she said, "You know *what* damn you."

She didn't feel like games. She was going to go fuck herself. She truly was. She didn't care if she

didn't know how to operate the damn thing and didn't give a shit if he heard her. She didn't even care if she had the batteries required. She planned to do herself nice and slow, take all the time she needed behind a closed and locked bathroom door.

"Check the front pocket. Your toy is in there." The humor spread over his face with rapid speed. "But I don't think you're gonna need it."

She bent back over the bag and retrieved her vibrator. She could feel her face heat as she pulled it out.

"You know, if you don't mind my saying so, I noticed that it's never quite made it out of the box." He pointed to the pink and lavender container.

"Shut up." She used the packaged toy to hit him once in the chest.

Tanner's approach turned all alpha male. She saw the change come over him like a tornado whipping around them with violent winds claiming everything in its path.

He was going to take what was already his. Claim and brand what he already owned and he would do it on his own terms. His fierce eyes told a story and if she wanted to bet on Tanner, she'd wager a large amount. He was going to take his own sweet time driving her slowly out of her mind. "Come here, sweetheart. Let me make it better."

"Damn you Tanner."

His name almost didn't slip from her mouth before he pulled her to him. His arms wrapped her in a possessive hold. He was so close, her heart could beat right next to his but it wasn't her heart that was pumping. It was the continual throb in between her legs, the pulsing sensation she'd been unable to satisfy with toys or fingers.

She struggled to get away from him but only because she saw the flash of recklessness in his eyes. "Oh Tanner, don't you see what you do to me?"

"I do, Ally. But now, I'm going to make it up to you."

*Behind The Game*

She believed him. The night had come. She would lose her virginity to the man she loved, or at least, she'd better.

## Chapter Six

Tanner moved her closer to the bed with a kiss that would make even an experienced woman weak in the knees. She'd survived a few of those kisses. She wasn't completely untouched, just never undressed.

He bracketed his arm around her waist, easing her to the mattress, loosening the buttons on his shirt before stripping the material over his head. Almost in the same move, he unhooked his belt and unzipped his pants.

*Oh fuck, this is really happening.*

"Scared?"

She shook her head.

"Sure?"

What did he expect? A full blown confession so they could talk about what they were about to do that they should've done years ago? Hell no. Not on his life.

Her head started swimming. She wanted to be around for the main event so losing some level of consciousness wasn't the way to go not when fucking the only man who ever appeared in her wet dreams finally seemed interested in doing the dirty deed.

Bare-chested, Tanner's abs were perfect and he probably knew it. The guy had never been short on receiving compliments.

He watched her watching him. Dark milk chocolate eyes raked over her as slowly as he caressed his knuckles down her cheek. "I'll be gentle with you. I promise. I won't hurt you. Not now. Not ever." His voice was quiet. It wasn't the Tanner she'd loved most of her life but definitely one that held some measure of appeal.

He helped her out of her black tank top and caught his breath. "So beautiful." He stared down at her barely covered breasts and she could've sworn

she saw his mouth water. She didn't wait for him to make the first move. Instead, she framed his face and brought him over her.

Kisses fell from his lips to hers, trailing down to her chin before slowly moving to the chest he fully explored, and frankly she was beginning to wonder when the skin to skin exhibition would begin. She arched her back, reached behind her upper body, and unhooked the final barrier separating them.

Years of wondering and then the permanent separation, nights of cold showers, visits to sex shops just to find a toy that looked somewhat appealing, and here he was, taking his own sweet time. Enough already! She didn't wait this long for a slow hand and a slower man.

A smile warned of things to come with a wicked promise falling from a sensual mouth. "You may wish later you waited for me to do that."

"I doubt it," she said, sliding away from him.

He caught her before she escaped. His hands disappeared under her skirt but he didn't bother to peek. Instead, he smoothed his palms over her thighs, continued to look at her breasts with a longing gaze and then he dipped his fingers under her thong and moaned. "Good Lord, you're as ready as you'll ever be, aren't you baby?"

She wanted him to shut up. So help her God, she'd probably pay him if he'd just find something better to do with his mouth.

He pushed her skirt away from her hips, clearing her mound and the pretty thong she'd worn with specific intentions of Tanner seeing what she wore underneath a short skirt.

"Damn," he whispered.

"Don't just look at it," she teased.

"Don't worry." He waggled his tongue.

Playfully, she kicked off her shoes. "You're so crude."

"I try, so help me, I do." Tanner stood up and his expression changed. His lips parted and his gaze met

hers. "This is your last chance, Ally. If I strip then this deal is done."

"Don't try to negotiate with me, Tanner. Lose the pants. Now."

"Demanding little thing, aren't ya?"

"I try, so help me, I do," she retorted dramatically.

After a chuckle, his demeanor shifted again and suddenly he became a carnal creature. He pushed his pants all the way down, working the material over knees and ankles. Kicking the pants aside, he never paid any attention to where they fell and he knelt to the bed almost immediately, practically ignoring the hard length hanging between his thighs.

When he returned to bed, his fingers slid up her calves. "You're so pretty, Ally."

*Damn, he's good.* He definitely knew how to make an impression on a woman.

His eyes never left her. He came over her, bracing himself over her body in an apparent effort to delay a flesh to flesh meeting. And that's when she noticed the physique of one perfect man.

Tanner Dorsey was all male, rock hard and ready to go. He was long and lean and thick with more desire than she ever thought possible. He didn't just want her. He had to have her.

He planted a simple kiss on her shoulder before moving to her breasts, but he couldn't, or maybe he wouldn't, stay anywhere long. Wherever he kissed, he left behind a singe, a burning sensation threatening to smolder for days and days to come.

"Tanner please, I can't wait. You have to—"

He towered over her and she looked down the length of their bodies wondering why she never expected to have such a true fascination with a man's cock. Tanner had a pretty dick, a wide head, a thick long shaft, and firm balls. She grinned, thinking about her assessment. Wouldn't he just blush to kingdom come if she told him his prick was pretty?

"I have to what?" he asked, drawing her gaze back to him. "Take you to the other side. Ally? Let you know what it's like to have a man invade your soul, ravage your body, and consume your mind? That's what I'm going to do. Make no mistake about what's happening here, because once I make you mine, no other man will have you. No other man will worm his way into your heart the way I will."

She didn't doubt it. He managed all of that with the first kiss. He had that pretty much covered before he ever made it to the first smooch.

His tongue swept down her stomach. He tucked his large hands under her, cupping her ass. Giving her a few squeezes, he said, "So perfect. You've always been just so beautiful."

"Tanner, stop."

"No. I want you to listen. You're the definition of pretty. You have those perfect natural breasts, the best tasting lips a man has ever kissed, and God help me, these legs will be the death of me. Maybe they don't go on for days but they still project the perfect image leading to a shapely body."

Ally had a runner's legs and a good figure, or so she'd been told but never in the way Tanner just expressed. Men obsessed over her and most she dated only wanted to screw her. No one deserved that opportunity, no one except the one who always reserved the right to claim her—the man she loved.

Sexual frustration took over and Tanner still seemed hell-bent on taking things slow. A small turtle moved faster than Tanner. "Damn you. If you can touch me with confidence then you can fuck me with conviction. Stop postponing this or I'm going to think you don't want me."

"Want you? Is that what you think?" he asked, blowing a stream of hot air over her opening. "I don't just want you, Ally, it's a struggle for me not to just eat you alive."

"Tanner."

"I'm serious," he assured her. He didn't blink. Instead, he watched her writhe under his touch and his caresses turned vile. He fondled her opening, dragging his finger through her folds and touching her clit with his thumb.

He didn't press his fingers inside her. Instead, he moved his hand over her bare mound and reached for her breast, tweaking her nipple with a pinching sensation that practically brought her out of the bed.

The rubbing became more aggressive. He tapped her bare mound with three fingers and she flinched. She arched for him. Her hips shot off the mattress.

"If you think that's good, just you wait." He slapped her mound and she cried out.

"That's my girl. Let me hear you scream."

Before she knew what to expect or how she would feel about the invasion, he locked his fingers inside her channel and fucked her manually, stretching her with three or four fingers and growling when her body naturally responded, closing around his knuckles.

"Ah shit, Ally, you really are the death of me."

"I want to be the life in you," she purred, watching him loving her.

He swatted her pussy again and dropped his jaw. "Like that did you?"

Her cries were stuck in her throat and she couldn't release them.

Again, he smacked her bare mound. "Did you shave just for me, Ally."

"Yes," she said honestly, biting down on her forefinger. "Are you pleased?"

He narrowed his gaze on her cunt. "Very," he said, thrusting his hand toward her body and fingering her faster and faster. "You're ready for me aren't you sweetheart?"

Hell, she'd been ready for him when she was eighteen. She closed her eyes and without thinking much about it, her finger went to her mouth. She bit down on her forefinger in anticipation. Maybe it was

a good thing because what came next would've drawn an outright bloody hell scream.

\* \* \* \*

His tongue didn't just meet flesh. He used the damn thing as a mechanical weapon. Dear God, it could've been a machine gun, darting in and out of her body with repetition and no sign of stopping. He fucked her with his lips and tongue like she imagined he'd soon fuck her with his cock.

In and out, he swiped with one lick and then another but that wasn't the best part. No, the really good stuff was still on the way and she knew it.

She remembered being told about Tanner's skills by another young woman a long time ago. Once they'd been described to her, she'd looked them up on the Internet bound and determined to know more about oral pleasure. Now, she could experience.

His gaze caught her in a daring test. He wanted her to watch. Wanted to see the pleasure he would soon bring and did he ever bring it on. With aggressiveness like no other and a delicious determination, she felt his breath on her skin and knew to prepare for a soul-ripping jolt.

Clamping down over her clit, he bit with just enough force to instill magic, spinning it through her with cunning skill. His tongue tapped the little button and good Lord, how she begged.

Her hands went to the sheets knotting them up in clenched fists. Her lower half shot off the bed and then she slid away from him, breathless and full of desire. "No more. Not this time, please Tanner. Let me feel you."

"Oh baby." He moved next to her, "You don't feel me?"

She knew what he meant. "I want my first time...to um...I don't want to spell it out for you!" She was so damn wet. She couldn't think with his fingers moving in and out of her slowly, leisurely. "Tanner, make me come. God bless, please!"

"I'd be delighted to," he teased.

"You know what I mean. I don't want to lose it now."

"You'll have to, I'm afraid." He fingered her faster, taking her to the welcome mat on pleasure's door.

She was caught in the storm of what she'd always desired and what felt better than anything she'd ever had in a wet dream. "Fuck me, Tanner. Fuck me silly. I want the first orgasm I ever have with you to be out of this world."

She didn't have to say another word. He moved over her, tucked her under his body and pressed the tip of his erection right at her folds. Then he backed away.

"I've waited for you, Ally."

No, she thought, shaking so hard she thought he might think she was already coming. He hadn't waited for her but that was okay. This was what she'd wanted, she didn't care what she'd missed. She was one hundred percent convinced after this, he would realize he belonged to her.

"Ally?"

"Tanner."

He pressed his length against her mound, refusing to enter her. "You can do anything you want with me. You don't have to wait. You can ask for it by name or show me what you want. Be wild with me, baby."

Holy fuck. She swallowed hard, eyeing the length of him. He was so big, much larger than anything she'd ever imagined. She was afraid to touch it yet anxious to feel him swell in her hand. She wanted to grip him, bring him to release and maybe even taste him if she dared.

He moved her hand to his lips. "Anything, Ally." He closed her fingers around the width of his cock and together they stroked.

He kissed her again and he found refuge in her touch. He looked so sated, like he could find complete satisfaction in foreplay even if he didn't find release.

She wanted to be vulgar with him. She wanted to find new ways to sin in his body.

"I don't want to hurt you, but you keep doing that and I may rip into you without meaning to."

She continued to pump him, handling his throbbing cock with a firm grasp while the urgency of relief pushed into her hand. The length and width brought with it measure by measure of weighted down excitement.

Tanner would deliver pleasure and pain. The moment arrived. Damn it! Why was she stalling? If another woman could handle it, and she knew many had, she could too. She didn't come this far to run away. "Tanner, please."

"Are you begging?" He would take her into a tight circle of ecstasy but damn it all he would make her ask for it until the bitter end.

"Please *just fuck me!*"

His eyes widened with the plea and then darkened with commitment to the cause. She didn't have to ask again. His dick rubbed against her opening. He must've been waiting for a little more encouragement.

She raised her hips forcing him to move right in. If he wanted motivation, she had plenty to share.

The first sensation wasn't like what she'd imagined. A sharp sting ripped through her body like a forcible tear widening as he gave her one inch more.

"Oh holy hell." She cried out.

"Hang on, Ally," he whispered, biting on his bottom lip. He pushed in again. "God almighty!"

"Tanner! Fuck!"

"You better believe it baby. It'll be the best screw of your life."

"The *only* one..." She reminded him. "So it better be!"

"Just for that," he winked. "I see little reason to postpone anything else. Never let it be said I made a lady wait."

He clasped her hands, squeezing her fingers when he held them and he screwed the hell out of her all at once, making her first scream in agony when the intimate seal shattered and then immediately cry out with joyful pleasure. He stroked her, caressing her pussy with his hard cock, making her crave him, want him, and oh God, need him.

Her legs wrapped and locked around his lower back. "I won't break."

"You're damn right you won't because I'm not going to break you." His moans of satisfaction pleased her. It became music to her ears. "But I may stay inside you forever, lover. God yes, you feel so good."

He made careful moves, took indulgent kisses, and gave her the most erotic massages, squeezing her breasts and caressing her arms. Who would have guessed? Tanner Dorsey was taking it slow, until she refused to let him.

Her nails scraped across his broad shoulders. She clawed him without meaning to but remained unashamed when she saw her nails marking their spot "Now!"

He hammered forward, thrusting inside her until the flood of his pleasure took her by complete surprise. "Oh! Sweet fucking mercy! Don't stop! Please! Tanner, don't ever stop loving me!"

He gave and then gave some more. Her words positively inspired him. "Fuck, yeah. Don't move. Right there. Good God, you're like velvet." His cock played sweet havoc on her virgin pussy and every single stroke only fueled her desire.

When she came, she bucked against him, gripping his shoulders and riding him. He brought her away from the bed, holding her ass and clutching to her like a last chance at summer.

An hour or so later, breathless and spent, they collapsed against the bed, where he fell against her chest, remaining there until he drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Seven

"Tanner, Tanner?" He was face down in the pillow and a mumble away from denying her an answer altogether.

"Don't tell me." He flipped over and faced her with a smile. "You're hungry. I know you." He kissed her forehead and then ran a lone finger over her belly before kissing the same spots he touched.

"I wish it was simple as a meal."

He knew her so well. She *was* hungry but food wasn't why she woke him. She had a real problem on her hands and Tanner or her brothers would have to fix it.

Tanner sat with his back against the headboard. "Oh yeah. I guess we need to chat about that *thing* I did, huh?"

"Among other topics."

"You know I love ya. I always have. I've hated to admit it but I have. It's just..."

She didn't want to hear it now. She knew there was a "but" in there somewhere and right now, she wasn't interested in explanations or excuses. "This isn't about us or the damn sex you kept from me all of our lives." She moved away from him and walked over to the window to peer outside. Yep, they were there. The white surveillance van parked out in front of the hotel made her shiver.

"You give a guy your virginity and don't want anything in return?" He shot her a confused look and then a smirk, a possible beginning to a probable war of many words.

"I have what I want." She picked up a pillow and threw it at him.

"You do?"

"I do. You just don't know it yet." She strutted across the room bare ass and naked and couldn't care

less. She sat in the leather chair comfortable in her newly discovered sexuality.

"If you don't put some clothes on, I'm going to be over there in a New York minute. Spanking your little tail just for strutting it around seems like the thing to do.

"I like the sound of that. Really, I do." Her voice hitched in her throat and then the tears came. The acknowledgement of someone beyond the door waiting to take him from her scared her to death. Never before had she known such joy or such sorrow within one twenty-four hour period.

"Baby...?" He jumped up and went to her wrapping his arms around her before moving them both back to bed.

"What's all this? Did I really wait too long?" He stroked her cheek.

She nodded. "But not for the reasons you think. I'm trying to figure out how to get you out of here. That's why I had you meet me here. I just can't figure all this out by myself, Tanner. There's a van down in the parking lot. The white one. It's surveillance."

He jerked, looked at her for a long while and then took a deep breath, holding it for what seemed like minutes. His cheeks swelled and he appeared to be in deep thought. After a sudden sigh, he jumped up and tossed clothes at her. Anger didn't show in his eyes. Not a hint of resentment. Nothing.

"Tanner, I'm sorry but it's not what you think."

He ignored her and went for his pants. Sticking one foot in and then another, she saw the side to him her brother had told her about. A smile settled across his lips but ice ran through his veins. He picked up the phone and hit one of the numbers on the keypad. "Yeah, it's time. Lock it down." He closed the phone.

"If we had all day, you'd never be allowed to put those clothes back on." He chuckled. "But...we don't have all day, do we?" His demeanor could swing faster than her PMS moods.

She shook her head.

"Well then, I guess I'd better start talking, convince you to come with me or something like that huh?" Tanner clasped his hands in front of him.

"What are you talking about?" Clearly, he knew more about what was going on than she did.

"Ally, we've known for some time now that our party was almost over. We just didn't know when."

"You mean you and my brothers?"

"Yes. We were tipped off last fall right before you came home. I was going to ask you... well, I'd ask your brothers to let me just give us a shot." He waved his hand above his head. "Hell, I don't know why I'm telling you this now. It's not like it will make a difference or change things. It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me. More than you know." Her voice was soft, weak, and barely above a whisper.

Tanner's ability to dress slowed considerably by his inability to do it in front of her. He walked over to the window for another peek while his hands continued to work with buttons. He stood there for a long time. "I couldn't leave you behind," he began, pausing as if he were tormented. "That is, I couldn't leave without seeing if there would be a slight possibility that you would consider running with me."

Tanner paced the floor. "I've had my guys on you for a long time. I know more about you than you know about yourself." A full blown revelation followed. She could sense it. "I know you get up at five-thirty in the morning and roll to the left and then the right before you throw the little digital alarm clock across the room. You know the one you bought at Zommers back when you first moved to Florida? That one. I know you shower twice a day, both times after running and you eat dinner every night, when you don't have a date, at six o'clock." His lips turned down in a little frown. "And you don't date often."

"Okay, Tanner. I get that you know all about me. It should creep me out but I accept it. You've been doing this to me since I was in middle school."

"If you stay with me, you'll need to get used to it, Ally." His voice broke, catching somewhere in between right or wrong maybe or perhaps just the sudden vocal expression of what extremes he'd take to keep her safe.

"If I *stay* with you?"

"Yes, if you'll..." The phone rang again lighting up his shirt pocket with the obvious threat that loomed.

Damn.

"Yeah? Yes. I told you she would be with me. *Yes, all night long.* What the fuck did you think? Now, get over it." He slammed the phone closed.

She covered her ears. "Do not tell me who that was or what they asked."

Tanner went to her and pulled her hard against his chest. "I told them last night that I was going to fuck their sister into next year and guess what, they both had some surprising news for me."

She understood what came next. He didn't have to say it because she knew her brothers.

"They told me if I did it now a proposal had better follow."

She gasped and turned around to hide the smile that crept across her lips. She tried to keep her mouth from saying "yes" before he asked but at the same time fought against her reality. She would need to say "no" when he did.

Tanner walked around her. Down on one knee he went. "Come with us."

"What?" She suddenly realized her stupid splendor.

He took one hand in his and then asked again. "I said, come with us." His head moved from side to side for a second before he continued. "We've bought a place out of the country and it's set back off the ocean. We've all been there several times. You'll love it. Your mom is going to be there. Darren is leaving with her now. We want you with us."

Her eyes swelled with tears. "You're proposing, down on one knee..." Her breath caught in her throat.

"Because you want me to come with you while you take my brothers, my mother, my..." she couldn't comprehend it all.

He didn't have a clue. The man just did not have one bloody damn clue. She swatted his head and then moved away from him. "You just take it all, don't you? Mother is too ill to travel but that doesn't matter to you. What matters is that you can do it. You can leave this country, pack it all up, and call it a day. The cost of doing business, isn't that right?"

He walked over to the drapes and peered down into the lot again.

"You take my youth and spin it any way you want it, *you* did that. You always led me on but never offered me anything in return. I spent days, no—not just days Tanner—*years*. I spent fucking years dreaming of you! What it would be like to be in your arms. *Your bed*. No other man ever touched me and for what? For you to rape me of my life and the only family I have?"

He tried to console her but she pushed him away.

"Don't you do that. Don't touch me!" Anger filled the space she proved she wanted.

"Have it your way." He backed off, just a little.

"Where's David? Hell, I guess he's going to do whatever the great Tanner Dorsey tells him to do huh?" Her words formed with fierce velocity.

He didn't look at her as he started to zip up his luggage. "It's not like that."

"Like hell it isn't. You just take and tear down and take some more. Wow, it must be great to be you."

Tanner nodded. "Okay, if that's what you believe then we're through here." He stood up and nodded toward the bed. "Whether you believe me or not Ally, I wouldn't have taken that. If I didn't think it was my only chance to get you to come with me, I wouldn't have left you with nothing."

She kicked at his luggage. "Don't you pity me you bastard! You aren't leaving me with nothing because

you aren't going anywhere!" She pulled her gun from a holster in the bottom of her duffle bag. Her arm shook. Heck, the joke was more on her than him.

"Beautiful. Just beautiful." He walked toward her. "Fire. Go ahead. Pull the fucking trigger. Do it because I swear to you, I'm not worth much and without you, baby I'm nothing and that's truth. Ally, I'm sorry if I hurt you. I swear, I didn't want to cause you pain. I only wanted to persuade you to come with us."

"Well you came up short!" Breathing was difficult and being in the same room with him presented a challenge. She lowered the gun but kept her gaze straight ahead. She saw him in it for a moment and then she didn't. He stood and went to the door and she watched that too in her peripheral.

"I wish you would reconsider. I don't have time to convince you but I happened to be the best chance your brothers or your mother had to keep your family together and they knew it. I've known it for awhile. This day was bound to come and when it did, I knew I was the only one you'd leave the FBI for." He opened the door but closed it again. With his hand on the back of it, he took a deep breath. "Damn. So here we are."

"Leave my job *for you?*" She was amazed at the audacity of her family. Never mind Tanner. What the fuck did he expect? If he'd gotten down on one knee and professed love or marriage, it might have been something she could have considered *but no*, he definitely fucked up. *Most definitely.*

Her phone rang and the caller ID confirmed suspicions. It was Fernandez.

"Agent Stephens."

"Steve told me you'd come through. Now, we followed your mother and brother to the airport. Apparently, she's ill, right? Going to her sister's place in Texas?"

A long silence spread over the room before she answered. "Yes, Texas."

Fernandez continued. "We have surveillance ready to set up as soon as we locate your other brother and of course, Dorsey."

"Surveillance? Sure. Of course you would." She swallowed.

"Where are you Stephens? I'll buy you a cup of coffee." That's when it hit her. He wanted to keep her talking. She shut down the phone and pressed the off button.

She began laughing hysterically before massaging her temple. "Oh but you're good." She pointed an accusing finger at him. "You're really, really good aren't you?" Tears streamed down her face.

Anger hit her with the reality of what the moment of their truth would soon be. "That's your fucking van?" She walked over and smacked him across the face once and then turned away before swatting him again. "Those are your people? Answer me, damn you!" The anger consumed her and then the reality of her world as Tanner and her brothers created it, hit her dead on. "Oh, no! No! You tell me this is a horrific nightmare! You tell me something, damn you! But don't you tell me you're dead serious about leaving the country?" A beat later she asked, "You're not coming back are you?"

Maybe the look on his face told her it wasn't a bad dream and even gave her a little of what she needed to see. Maybe he wanted to tell her that she was wrong before he allowed her to see that she was exactly right.

Her voice was barely above a whisper. "And if you can arrange all this then there's more isn't there?" She couldn't say it. She fought an internal war but she couldn't stop the rage. "If you have that much power then you're the man we've been looking for aren't you?"

Tanner stared at her blankly.

"Answer me damn you! Are you behind the unknown American-based cartel we've been looking for?"

He refused to dignify her question with a response.

And that was all the confirmation she needed.

## Chapter Eight

Tanner's hand went to his cheek covering it but not from the sting so much. Instead, it was something else. He knew there was a good chance it would be the last time she touched him. So it was a hit. This late in the game, who the fuck cared?

Ally sank to the bed burying her face in her hands. "Why? Why would you do these things? You're not this monster. I've read his profile. I've studied the cases. He's not you." She stared up at him.

He didn't have the response she wanted to find. Sure, he could give her something to save his own face but he wasn't going to give her what she truly needed. To give those answers would mean to take the other two people that she loved most from her and she wouldn't be able to accept the truth. That would be enough to break her and he loved her too much to destroy her.

"Why Tanner?"

He looked away from her.

She rushed at him with fists drawn. "Why? You answer me damn you! You owe me that much."

The answer he would give her, ripped him in two. It tore through his soul and conquered his identity. The one that she had chosen for him. The one that he had no other choice but to allow her to believe was the only answer he would supply. "I did it because I could."

The room fell quiet.

It was better than telling her the whole truth. The sports were what he loved. The bookie lifestyle, the games and money, the trips and travel, it was all enough. More than he deserved but not enough, never enough, for the Stephens boys. They always wanted more.

Her words were slow to the draw. "I ought to kill you myself." But they were damning.

"Maybe you should because without you, I'm already dead. The possibility of having you was what I lived for and now that I've had you, I don't know if I can let you go."

"Nice touch but I don't believe you. I'll never believe another word that comes out of your pathetic mouth."

"Then, you've made up your mind."

"Made up my mind? As if I have a choice. You've taken that away from me. If I let you walk out of here and anyone finds out, I lose my job. Do you hear me? I lose the only career I ever wanted! It's the only thing I ever wanted outside of having you love me."

Tanner stood mere inches from her. He looked beyond her and closed his eyes for a minute savoring the mess of tangled sheets and forbidding his mind to do anything more than to grasp hard to the memory still lingering there. "I'm sorry Ally. I really am." His fingertips touched her hair and she smacked him away.

"I've spent my whole adult life loving you."

His gut hurt. He could've bent over from the pain but it wasn't anything compared to the knife he felt twisting in his heart. "I know you have."

"I said I love you damn it. You're so stoic that you can't even give me something to make this all go away? Oh Tanner, why would you do this? Just tell me that much." Her arms wrapped around her body and she began to move back and forth rocking herself into his heart with a memory he would hold forever.

His earth shattered. Completely broken, he forced the words to cross his lips. "If you've loved me, and I know you have, then I should love you enough to let you stay behind. I shouldn't have asked you to go. I never should have told you I needed to leave. We've left things as-is before and that's how I meant to leave them. I couldn't do it."

Kneeling in between her legs he tried to leave her with enough to last her a lifetime, enough to remind her later why she would be better off without him; maybe without the lot of them because none of them deserved her—not her brothers or her mother, and certainly not him. “Ally, all you ever loved was an illusion of me, the very idea of what I could’ve become if only I’d had you there to love me before we set up our business.”

He stopped himself from spilling it all. He stroked her hair, petting her once more, but realizing a last touch wouldn’t be enough. Only moments before he’d hoped it would. Now, looking into her eyes, he knew it never would. He straightened his back, squared his shoulders, and forced the cold empty gaze to surface. He possessed a killer’s eyes. He’d been told so many times.

He looked at her with hardness. The same glare he used when he beat the shit out of people who didn’t pay what they owed them. The eyes that looked the other way once their businesses gained another focus.

Tanner stared down on her, dismissive and uncaring; he hated doing it, despised himself for hurting her so.

She caught his hand and refused to let him leave. “Don’t do this. Please, Tanner. I’m begging you...don’t.”

“Someday Ally, sometime in the future, you’ll thank me. Maybe you’ll even still smile when you think of me, but if I stay here and I’m arrested, then what do we have?” He watched her accept what he said and that too, tore at his heart.

“What we’ve always had!” she blurted it out.

“No honey, no. What we had was something special. What *we have* is something that you’ll never replace. I know because I’ve looked. I’ve tried to move on without involving you but I can’t. You’re in my heart, but I still want you to go. You live what’s in

yours." He pointed to her chest and then touched her cheek. "And no regrets, baby. None. Okay?"

She nodded and sniffed, stifling an outright cry. He knew she couldn't see his good-bye for what it had to be...forever. After he was gone, she would try to decide what went wrong and what she might have done to fix him or her family. That's when she'd finally pack it up and go back to Florida. There, she'd find everything he'd left in place for her. On the short chance she didn't leave with him, he'd made arrangements for her. Something always told him she wouldn't go. So, he'd made sure if he couldn't have her that she would at least have a wonderful life, full of anything and everything money could buy.

A year before, when the cartel began to plot their move, he started putting everything in motion. He wanted Ally financially secure when the bottom fell out of everything. Even though Ally hadn't come to terms with the fact that she was a member of one of the most powerful families in the cartel, he still wanted her to live off the family. Perhaps some things were just better left unsaid. Besides, she'd discover what he had in place for her later. Then maybe she would understand the extent of his love.

He touched her hand and nodded. Once she glanced up, the tears rolled. They would stain her cheeks for a little while but they'd mark his soul forever. He wanted to tell her good-bye. He was dying to go to her, wrap her tightly in an embrace meant to last her well into a future they would never experience together.

He needed to tell her he loved her more than his own life and always had. But some things, even unspoken truths, were often the greatest acts of love. Tanner planned to go to his grave with several of them.

## Epilogue—Unspoken Truths One Year Later

Tanner was sitting behind a huge walnut desk when Darren came in with a folder. He tossed it on the desk before he turned to leave. "It's the package you've been expecting."

He grabbed it and ripped open the flap. He stared blankly at the first three photos before reaching one that would change his world and forever ruin him. "Oh holy hell. They're beautiful." His words filled the room.

Darren stared out beyond the patio to the open sea. "It appears you were right. Twins."

The new father ran his hand back and forth and back and forth over the pictures. "Why did she..." He stopped himself from saying it. He knew why Ally chose to have those children. They were a part of him.

He walked over to a bookshelf and propped up the pictures. A close-up snapshot of her alone told a story that he didn't necessarily want to see. She was heartbroken.

The sadness took over and suddenly the pain was more than he wanted to carry. He ran his hand over the photograph once more. "Burn them."

Darren walked over and collected the photos that Tanner had only just placed strategically around the room. "When hell freezes over."

"You think you know all about your sister and me don't you buddy?" Tanner glanced back at her pictures and those of his children. "Well, you don't."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

Tanner strolled over to the patio doors and opened them. "There are so many things you can't even begin to understand about Ally. Things she knew about all of us, things that she loved about each of

us, and barriers that she would've crossed over if any one of us had asked. That's why I left her behind. Because I never wanted to witness the change in her like I have the rest of us. I never wanted her to change just because it would make our lives a bit more comfortable."

Darren slapped him on the back. "Then you live in your cozy hell, Tanner. I'm here to tell you, with two kids on her hip, my sister won't stay single long."

He slammed another folder against Tanner's chest before he turned away. Tanner fumbled with the tab knowing what he'd find. He'd heard all about it but didn't know if he could stand to see the proof. Still, her brothers put in the order. They wanted to torture him with the evidence and they provided plenty of it.

The first photograph captured *him* with Ally alone walking hand in hand with a belly larger than both of them. Tanner frowned, wishing he had been there when his twins were born.

The second image was a torturous picture of the four of them. Marcel Fernandez moved right in. He'd become her hero. He saved her job, helped her prepare for motherhood and obviously tried to replace *him*.

"He's living there now. In case you're curious." David walked in the side entrance.

"I imagine he is." Tanner's eyes burned. He looked at another photograph, a close up. Pure hatred burned through Ally's pupils. "Does she know our men are there?"

"Are you kidding?" David laughed. "She strikes poses for them on the sidewalk and tells the twins to smile for Daddy. They're going to grow up thinking that every man with a camera is their father."

Tanner dropped the eight by ten glossies to his side. "Maybe." He stood up fast, the anger they deliberately instilled now pushing his buttons. "But there's one man that will never own that title."

"That was your choice," David grumbled, without looking up from the newspaper that he'd just started to read.

"I'm talking about Fernandez."

The silence was thick when the meaning behind it stilled the lukewarm ocean waters. The intent divided the air to a degree of reckoning most in their business fully understood.

The two brothers exchanged glances. They typically ordered the hits. They'd been masterful at it. Now, Tanner called one. It would be handled with the best of intentions because Tanner knew Marcel Fernandez, and he didn't want him anywhere near his woman or *his* family.

## Part Two

### Unspoken Secrets

"I think he's trying to draw us out." David rarely spoke but when he did, Tanner typically paid attention. His deadly eyes and cool demeanor proved him dangerous but his sharp mind saved them countless headaches—enough of them to guarantee he deserved the floor when he took it. When the man uttered the first syllable, Tanner clung to the words that followed.

Tanner walked across the living room and joined his buddies at the wet bar. Darren, usually the chatty one, didn't have a lot to say. He was in deep thought and keeping his distance. David just appeared angry as hell.

Tanner studied him. "Something else on your mind, David?"

"I can't put my finger on it but something is off with Ally."

"Have you seen her?" Excitement and concern drove his tone and he felt worry pinch his brow into a sudden frown.

"Here." He handed him a manila envelope. Every time Tanner saw one of the long pouches, he knew what to expect underneath the flap. Pictures of his family, particularly his girls, existed there.

He thumbed through the photographs. David studied him and Darren nursed a beer like it might be his last. The slight scratchy sound of shuffling paper and glossy photographs filled the room.

"I don't understand." Tanner's gaze darted between the men in front of him. Ally's brothers were his best friends and business partners but when it came to his relationship with their sister, they seldom made his life easy.

"It would appear, smart one," Darren paused and then continued, "Ally is going to marry the son-of-a-bitch."

"Over my dead body." Tanner tossed the snapshots and they systematically spread across the tile-covered bar.

"It may be if you don't get that temper in check." Darren pointed out the obvious while his older brother went back into his shell of silence. David's initial, never mind short, statement was a contribution and beyond those few words, he didn't have a lot more to offer.

"I'm not afraid of Marcel Fernandez," Tanner snapped. "He's a dirty Fed and one of these days, I'm going to expose him for the slime he is—count on it."

David drew a quick breath and released it. He ran his hand across the base of his neck and exchanged knowing glances with his brother before he walked out of the room.

Darren took the unspoken cue. "Tanner, you may not be afraid of him but you damn sure better fear what he can do to all of us."

"I'm not concerned about us. I'm worried about Ally. She's marrying the sorry SOB? What the hell is she thinking?" Tanner crossed the room then and looked out over the back lawn.

"If I know my sister, she's thinking you will never allow it." Darren made a solid point. "Maybe she's hoping our cameras will capture enough proof to send you into a tailspin. She probably knows if the birth of your girls didn't draw you out, the marriage to your enemy might."

"She's damn right. It's bad enough she has the asshole living under the same roof with her, in *my* house, mind you." He paused, narrowed his eyes, and then went on without a second to spare. "When I left, I made sure she had everything. I gave her the opportunity to live in the lap of luxury and how does she repay me? She moves Fernandez in as soon as I turn my back."

Darren loved his sister and Tanner was smart enough to realize he'd defend her. No, he never wanted her with Tanner but he never wanted to see her completely miserable. He picked up one of the pictures and tossed it across the bar. "I don't think she's repaying you. David and I have talked about it. We think the whole thing is a setup and has been from the beginning. We believe Marcel intended to draw you out from the moment he moved there. He's using her for bait and make no mistake, when you make your move, he'll be ready."

"Maybe." Tanner studied a lone sailboat floating, barely drifting really, out in the open sea. He nodded in its direction just to point it out, acknowledge it for some reason. "I didn't plan on going back."

"You'll go back now because if you don't, Marcel *will* marry her." He grinned and added a jab. "I can't imagine you standing by while he raises your girls and beds my sister."

Tanner damn near came unglued. "Fuck you, Darren. You know and I know if he's living there, that's exactly what he's doing now!"

"Then it's about time to change things up. Go bring her home." Darren patted him on the back. He then left him in his own misery. If he measured it out with a little honesty and weighed in with a lot of his hidden emotions, he would have to say plenty existed there. He just didn't know what to do about it.

\* \* \* \*

"Ladies and Gentleman, we are now boarding Flight 329 to Knoxville, Tennessee. We ask those passengers traveling in First Class or with small children to go ahead and board now. On behalf of Strickland Airways, we thank you for traveling with us today."

Ally grabbed her purse and clutched the book she planned to read. "That's me."

Marcel studied her closely. "Don't worry about us. We'll be fine." He looked down on the two young

ladies on either side of him. Their small hands looked so fragile in the large man's palms.

"I know. Take care of them, okay?" She glanced at one of her daughters and then the other before she looked back over her shoulder as if she wanted someone, anyone to see her. She stooped down then and kissed her little girls on their rosy cheeks. "Mommy is going to go away for a couple of days but when I come back, we'll have lots and lots of fun, okay?"

The cute darlings looked up at their mother and nodded. Their golden locks swirled down their back. They were dressed in plaid casual shorts and sandals, matching of course, and each had a beautiful bow to accent tousled ribbons.

"Take care of yourself." Marcel leaned in to kiss her and she turned her cheek.

"No one is here to take snapshots so let's give it a rest." She glared at him only for an additional second before she leaned down and embraced her daughters one last time. "I'd better go."

"Yes, you should. See you Friday." His dark hooded eyes moved over her. "Maybe the time away will do you some good. When you get back, we can start nailing down our final wedding plans."

"Friday." She repeated once and then backed away.

A few moments later, she boarded the plane and sank into her window seat. In the distance she saw Fernandez and her two children standing at a large bay window waving at the plane.

*I've lost my ever-lovin' mind to let him watch my girls.* She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. She reminded herself one last time. She trusted Marcel with her children. The girls loved him. He was the only father figure they'd ever known and he'd helped her raise them. Only, now with marriage plans pending, she felt so indifferent. He was forcing her into a marriage she didn't want and in some ways, he

used her girls to achieve what he wanted most. She made it easy for him.

If Marcel thought for one second that he could draw Tanner out with the threat of wedding bells, then he was dumber than he looked. She shifted her shoulders and back against the upright position of her seat. Tanner didn't show up for the birth of his children, and he sure wouldn't chase her down the aisle to stop a marriage, would he?

## Chapter Two

"Either you're bound and determined to piss me off or you have totally lost your fucking mind." Tanner flopped down in the seat next to her. He had on a disguise and the best way to describe him—obvious. His large frame looked pretty much the same but his phony mustache and creepy glasses just stood out as fake and unnatural. She imagined he put those on just for her.

Ally didn't act impressed or surprised. "I guess shopping for wedding dresses proved a little much, huh?" Her head rolled over to the side and the new angle allowed her to look at him dead on but she didn't move her head off of the rest supporting her neck.

Tanner's lower chin quivered some as he outwardly resisted a smile. He looked like he wanted to laugh one minute or battle out his anger the next. And damn it all, he still looked good enough to eat. Three years did a lot to whet a woman's appetite and her hunger for him grew with each passing day. She hated him for it—truly she did.

His six-foot-three frame didn't do anything but call out to her from the moment he stepped on the plane. Yes, she knew the second he boarded because she heard the stewardess perk right up. Even in his silly disguise, the man commanded attention. Even under his stupid wig with curly bleach-blond hair, he added a few electrical charges to her nerve endings. Evidently, his smile did the same for the stewardess on the prowl for a rich husband. Damn him, no double-damn him. Even now, he projected confidence, wealth, and most definitely, sex appeal.

He took a minute, only one, to get situated. He never bothered to look behind him or to the side. He most likely had the flight checked out thoroughly

before he made his reservation. He probably felt fairly confident that the only threat of a Federal Agent happened to be seated to his left.

When he turned to face her, he took his glasses off but he didn't bother with the wig. "You look good enough to screw right here."

"Fuck you Tanner."

"Do you want to? It worked out quite well for us the first time, didn't it? We have two beautiful little girls to show for it and a thriving relationship, from what I can tell." He moved closer. "Ready to go again?"

She swallowed hard. Something was way off with Tanner Dorsey and she knew she was the pending problem behind his obvious current issues. Tanner was always light-hearted and a barrel of laughs. He was a lot of fun to be around and too immature to let life catch him by the balls and then string them like beans. He just didn't give a shit and he never took himself or anything else too seriously. He lived for the party. Now, he seemed barely able to draw air and when he did, it fell on her ears like a tortured breath he struggled to gain in the first place.

His eyes met hers and then he looked her over from head to toe. Where life once danced, the lights had dimmed. He looked sad and lonely, almost miserable.

Ally turned away from him and stared out at the runway. They backed away from the terminal and she pointed. "Want to see them?"

"I've seen them. I walked right by them in the airport and it took all the strength I had not to pull out a gun, slide it up to Marcel's head and just pull the fucking trigger."

"I hope to hell you aren't armed."

"It's the only reason Fernandez is still among the living, Ally. I can promise you." He shifted his weight some and then glared at her. "They're beautiful."

"They're yours." She stated the obvious.

"As if I wouldn't know my own children." A deeper sadness crept across his face. "The guys tailing you get a kick out of them." He reached in his coat pocket and brought out a cellular phone. He showed her the images he had captured on the screen.

"Yes, well, I do always try to tell them to smile for the camera," she noted.

"You tell them to grin at Daddy."

"So the guys tell you everything, do they?"

"I know all, Ally." He moved closer. "Remember?"

A sudden shiver warmed her rather than chilled her. She remembered his confession three years ago when she returned home to Tennessee. It was the last time she saw Tanner, her mother and her brothers. He confessed he'd never been able to leave her alone and one of the things he admitted stunned her then as much as it irked her now. His men never stopped tailing her and because of them, he knew more about her life than she did, even intimate things a woman doesn't want a man to know.

"So you know I'm living with Fernandez." She chopped out the unneeded confession, hoping to sting him. Of course he knew.

"You're not sleeping with him." Curt words rang out and snapped off at the end with an angry growl.

"You keep telling yourself that Tanner, you keep telling yourself whatever makes you feel all warm and cozy at night."

He quickly locked his palm with hers. She tried to pull away from him but he just held her there. "I know a sexually gratified woman when I see one, and you, my sweet lady, are anything but satisfied." His thumb caressed the bone on hers and her clammy palms all but gave away her true feelings for the man seated next to her.

Ally looked outside once more and all the pain she'd felt over the past few years came rushing back. Emotions caught in her chest and she wanted to lash

out. Now wasn't the time or the place. She wanted to scream and shout at him but the flight home was far too short to say everything she wanted to say. The plane took off and at the same time the pilot announced over the intercom something about the flight time and current weather conditions, but really, who the hell cared?

She took a deep breath and studied their intimate connection. How had she lived through the last three years without him? The only thing that was important now, all that ever really mattered was that Tanner came back for her. She gripped his hand only tighter and the first tear fell as she closed herself off from the pain.

While his left hand gripped hers, he moved around her and stroked her hair.

"I've missed you, Ally. Every single day, I've longed for you in a way I can't begin to explain."

"I can't do this now. I just can't." She turned to look at him and his lips curved as soon as he saw the tear. Using the pad of his fingers, he swiped the first one and remained close enough to wipe away the second and third too.

"Tell me about our girls."

She smiled then as she thought of their daughters. She studied him closer as she thought of their dancing eyes, something they definitely inherited from their father. "They look and act like you."

"Then I take it they're perfect."

"Yes, even when they're not."

A dimple formed in his cheek and his eye twitched. He must have caught her truer meaning and it was all she needed to warm her in places only he had traveled.

\* \* \* \*

Ally gathered her luggage at the terminal and quickly moved through the airport acting as if she'd never seen or spoken to Tanner. Three years ago, they'd met for their first and only romp at the Alcoa

Hilton right next to the runway. Today, she didn't ask him where they'd go because she didn't want to know and quite frankly she didn't want to go anyway. Not today. Tomorrow very well could be a different story.

Tanner had ruined her for another man that particular day. And even now he realized he was the only man for her and that alone pissed her off.

The love Ally held for Tanner ran deep. At twelve she met him, at fourteen she loved him, at eighteen she craved him and she finally held him in her arms at twenty-two. For one day, just a few short hours, he belonged to her.

Ally looked up at the sky. She walked outside and struggled with her bag until she made it to the sidewalk. There, she released a deep sigh of relief. Fresh air never smelled better.

Her mind churned with the past. She briefly revisited her history with Tanner as she glared across the street at The Hilton. It was one day, one fuck, and one knock-up. She knew how to do things the right way. Truly, she did. She stared at the hotel where it all took place and mumbled a few choice words under her breath.

Her luggage rolled along behind her. She started to hail a cab when as luck would have it, Tanner pulled up and reached across the front seat. "Get in."

"No. Not this time. Tanner, I have a lot of unfinished business here. I swear I do. I don't have time to have you come in and screw up my life again. There are things I have to do. I only have two days before I have to head back and Marcel..."

"Don't you ever say his name in front of me again," Tanner grated out, leaving the Jeep in park and making his way around the vehicle. He loaded up her luggage and held the passenger door open for her. "Get in or I'll toss you in and I promise I don't give a shit which way you prefer."

At five foot four, Ally wasn't exactly a match for Tanner. A solid strength in his own right, he hovered

over her like a statue. His broad arms wrapped around her and he quickly proved, he didn't plan to waste a lot of time matching wits.

Tanner secured her in what most bystanders would have viewed as an affectionate embrace and all but tossed her across the front seat. He jogged around the vehicle and jumped inside before she had time to escape or further protest.

Ally's lips quickly puckered into a formidable pout. "Damn you." She kicked the dashboard and threw her head back. "I'm here on business." Even though her body lashed out, her voice concealed controlled anger.

"Then get in touch with whoever it is you need to call and tell them you missed a flight or you're not feeling well. Cancel your meetings. Hell, don't show up. I don't fucking care." His face turned red. She had it in her to throw a tantrum and should've let him have it.

"I will not!" She kicked the glove compartment again and threw her fist into the side of the door this time. "I hate you!"

"Good, that's a start. The controlled Ally on the plane just about pissed me off." He wheeled out of the parking lot on two wheels. The speed he quickly gathered racing up Alcoa Highway proved he wanted to get wherever they were going fast.

She shot him a look out of the corner of her eye and then glared straight ahead. "You are not going to come into my life and turn it inside out again. I refuse to let you." She turned on him then and screamed in his face. "Stop this car now!"

He slammed on the brakes. Hell, yeah, he did. Right in the middle of Alcoa Highway, the man just did not give a rat's ass about anything—except maybe Ally and his little daughters.

"Ally, you are going to sit over there and be quiet and listen to me." Cars blew their horns. He hit the emergency lights.

Shit. Now she knew she was in trouble. He didn't plan on moving from the middle of the road anytime soon.

She put her hands over her ears and glared at him with a smirk. "Go ahead, stay right here. See if I care, but while you're running that trap, let me remind you bright one that there is a warrant out for your arrest so go ahead sit in the middle of the fucking highway. I don't care. When you find the bright lights behind you, I will flash my badge and say I apprehended you."

As if her declaration hit home, he checked his rearview mirror, turned off the emergency blinking lights and moved the gearshift down into drive. "You're unreasonable."

"No, I'm just the black sheep of the family, remember?"

"White as snow is what you are and what you've always been to me." He happened to speak the truth with two separate meanings in one statement.

Ally was the only one in her family who didn't have connections to Tanner's cartel. Her mother lived with her brothers and Tanner which made her a guilty party, as far as Ally was concerned. Ally worked for the FBI, hardly a black sheep but since her entire family wrapped themselves into a world of crime, the sparing differences became quite obvious.

Then there happened to be a much more significant meaning— she'd always belonged to Tanner. No other man ever touched her the way Tanner touched her. No other man gained her attention or earned her favor. To allow someone else the opportunity seemed like adultery and that too, drove her to the edge of stark madness.

## Chapter Three

They pulled up to a rustic cabin and Tanner jumped out. He maintained a certain spring in his step. Ally knew it well. Tanner practically danced when he had a noose around every female body part that ached for his touch. All of hers qualified.

"You're a bastard." She spat the words at him as he held the door open for her. She couldn't help it. She remembered the last time they were together, how she pleaded with him to stay, and he'd walked out on her. Even when she was pregnant with their girls, he hadn't returned.

"Get out." He watched her with cold eyes. Those same eyes would later undress her and she damn well anticipated the event. But she didn't have to like the fact she was putty in his hands.

"Go fuck yourself." She glanced around at their surroundings. The little cabin was nestled in the heart of a hidden alcove covered by trees and nestled against a platform of rocks. It was a romantic hideaway in the heart of The Great Smoky Mountains.

He ignored her while he grabbed her luggage and his. He seemed to swing all of it in one motion over his shoulder and under his arm while tugging another suitcase behind him. He tossed the luggage onto the porch and sat down on the front stoop.

The way he parked the Jeep when they first arrived, Ally only needed to look up and straight ahead. She was staring into his sexy-hot eyes. Even with his disguise, Tanner's intense focus seared every inch of her flesh.

"I'm waiting," he called out, probably bracing for the worst.

"I want to go back."

"Go back where, Ally?" He studied her then, really seemed to look *through her* more than *at her*.

"There are a lot of things I'd do over again if I had the chance so how far back are we traveling here?"

"I want to go back and..." Where the hell *did* she mean?

Now that she stopped to think about it, there were too many places she truly wanted to revisit. She wanted him to take her back to the airport where he found her. She wanted to be twelve years old again and hate him because he was her brother's friend who pulled her pigtails. She wanted to be fourteen and chase him through the mall while he tried to steal a kiss from his latest arm ornament. Most of all, she wanted to love him with a passionate fire once again—the way she did the last time she saw him and the last time he'd held her.

She buried her face in her palms and screamed into her skin. "I hate this!" She looked up. "I despise you for the things you take away from me and the way you shrug it off and act like you have the right."

He stood up then and held his hand out. *Arrogant ass*. What a true ass-hole. He had just enough confidence to believe she wanted to leap from the Jeep and what? Run into his arms?

The thought tempted her. Then, her phone rang.

"You should probably get that." He was far too smug. He looked eager and almost fucking guilty—*of something*. Yes indeed, she should probably answer it.

"Agent Stephens."

\* \* \* \*

Tanner watched her as she listened and remarkably, he noted how calm she seemed.

"What? When?" She glared at him.

He shook his head and then looked at his watch and pointed to it reminding her of the time factor. The call could be traced, after all.

"Is he okay? Where are the girls now? You don't know where my daughters are?" She'd started to scream but Tanner was there to reassure her. When she'd asked about Fernandez's condition, he'd lifted

his hands and shrugged. He felt the well earned smile tug at his lips.

"Easy come, easy go, Ally." He chuckled.

Her eyes narrowed on him.

"Hang up the phone," he whispered with a smile.

That's when she finally got the truer message. Her little cheeks puffed and turned nearly blue bypassing the red tint of rage he thought he might originally see. Hell yeah, she recognized his tactics. He saw the recognition wash across her face. He realized right then and there that he made a slight error in judgment. He quickly reminded himself he knew how to handle her—or so he thought. That was his first mistake, but everyone was entitled to one or two.

He moved his forefinger across his throat. "Cut the call *now!*"

She slapped the cellular device shut and jumped out of the Jeep. "You have them."

"They're my daughters. Of course, I have them."

Glaring at him, she swallowed hard and began to walk toward him slowly. "You son-of-a-bitch."

He had to hand it to her. She didn't have a lot of respect for his momma. First, he'd been called a bastard and now an SOB. *What next?* He took a deep breath and waited for the rage. He straightened his back, squared his shoulders and truly prepared.

"You sorry, self-serving, egotistical, fucking animal!"

Okay, so she still had a few names left in her. He crossed his arms and took a deep breath. Damn, he wished she'd use those lips for something more creative.

"Did the welfare of Holly and Molly ever occur to you? They will be terrified, you illiterate asshole!" She ran forward with her fist ready to strike. Horror in her eyes and true madness firing her spirit forward. "You are truly pathetic."

Surely her extended vocabulary didn't stop with one final word. No, he felt certain she had one or two

more. He stood back, presumably out of a propelling arm range. "Is that the best you've got, baby?"

"Did you ever think about your own daughters? Hmmm?" She continued to rant and rave as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Actually, thanks to you, they are very content."

"I doubt it." She glared at him. "They're probably very frightened."

"The phone call I received at the baggage terminal proved my theory correct."

"What do you mean? I can barely wait to hear this." She backed away from him, swiping at the tears still streaming down her face Damn it. Why did she always have to cry around him?

"Thanks to you, every single time my photographer went around the kids, they grew up thinking their daddy was always around them. They were more than happy to see *Daddy* with the camera today. After Marcel, pretty much fell over, they ran to our photographer. Care to guess what they called him?" He was amused.

"You had this in mind from the beginning."

"Not really but it worked out in the end."

She shook her head. "End hell. Tanner, this is far from over."

He wanted to laugh outright because in truth, he hated Marcel Fernandez but since the man had been kind to his daughters, he'd spare her the hilarity he found in it. "Naturally, since they've seen our guy Bob behind the camera all of their lives, our little darlings felt safe when he collected them so you really have nothing to worry about at all. In fact, they even told airport security Bob was in fact, their daddy. Since he had numerous pictures of them, who were they to stop him?"

"You sorry prick."

"That's me." He couldn't help but feel proud. He'd thought of almost everything.

"So this is how it's going to be now? You're taking the girls from me?" She set her jaw.

"I want my family." He nodded. "And—that includes you." He moved closer to her. "But if I can't have the trio, I'll take the twins. Either way, they're going to know their father."

"You want me to give up my life, for yours?" She studied him. He fully expected a battle of words, he was ready whenever she wanted to begin.

"Um, yeah. That's pretty much the gist of it," he said, folding his arms over his chest.

Rather than argue, she slumped down to the steps. "Why am I not surprised?"

He moved closer but remained out of striking distance.

Ally didn't bother to look at him. She just stared off into the woods surrounding them. "You always do this. You screw up everything I want and then you do it with a smile like I should go along with it. Well, Tanner, I'm done. I'm not doing it anymore." She swallowed hard. He watched her defy her tears then, fight to prove she maintained some element of self-control.

He knew better. When it came to him—she didn't have power. She surrendered everything she had for the greater good—him.

A sarcastic moan fell from his lips. "I know what ya mean." He rubbed the back of his neck and tossed the glasses and the wig. His disguise all but gone, he reached out and moved his hand under her chin. When he brought her gaze to focus on him he continued, "I'm not either, Ally. I can't make it without you. This arrangement we have is not working for me. You've always been my girl and now you're going to act like it." He felt the flutter in his heart. Damnation, the woman made his heart beat faster now than she did when she turned twenty-one and wore those hide-tight shorts.

"Oh fuck you, Tanner!" She moved by him and gave him the best go-to-hell glare she could manage.

"Oh yeah? Well I hope so, because baby, I gotta tell you, one time was not enough." He dropped a

cell phone into her lap. "Hit redial and you'll get your mom or one of those handsome dudes you claim for brothers. You can check on the kids and then you can come in here and make good on a few of those fuck-you promises. I'll be the one on the bed with his dick in hand."

\* \* \* \*

Minutes later, Ally joined him. She crept inside like she was afraid to be there with him and that broke his heart. If circumstances were different, she might pay closer attention to the element of romance waiting there. Maybe he should point out the obvious.

"Why?" She stood in the center of the room with her arms hanging at her sides. She looked exactly as he'd imagined-exasperated, angry, and just too damn beautiful for words.

He stopped stacking beer in the fridge and thought about his reply before he gave her the answer she already had, the one she'd surely find if she searched inside herself long enough. "I told you three years ago and I'll tell you now. Anything I do, Ally, I do because I can."

She walked closer. "But, Tanner. *Not this*. I'll do anything you ask but please, please don't take my girls from me."

He saw the fear in her eyes. The way it lingered with a haunting shadow of mixed emotions chained him to her forever. He wanted to protect her from himself and from any possible unpleasant occurrence in her life which made for complications because he also wanted to love her. At the same time, as much as he loved her, he wasn't going to let her take his girls from him.

He closed the refrigerator. "You think I want to raise the twins without their mother? Is that what you really believe?"

"You already did! Momma confirmed they're there with her."

"They're visiting their uncles and grandma while I'm working on their mother." He smiled easily. "I've missed you, Ally."

He moved behind her and slammed the door but not before he eyed the porch and thought how nice it might be to sit on the swing with Ally's head on his shoulder.

He debated over how he wanted to pursue her, realizing he needed to be her best friend, the love of her life, a patient man. He also wanted to rip right into her, take what belonged to him and fuck the daylights out of her until she believed she was his woman again.

Tears landed on her cheeks. "You say you've missed me? How do you miss someone you only wanted to own but never quite possessed?"

"Oh I think you know I've possessed you—in every way a man can. I promise you, I can still feel you in all the right places." He shook off a growl but the groan came with a carnal hunger he only covered up with a little more chatter. "Damn, you look good. Better and better with age—like fine wine and all that."

"Still not one for words," she pointed out, cocking that little hip. Her dainty hand rested on the small of her waist. Nervously, she changed her stance.

He was getting to her. The tone she used with him, softened. Minutes now, mere seconds, and he'd try to steal a kiss, just the first one. The initial smooch would lead to many more because he'd waited a long time to hold her in his arms again. The hard-on he wore around for her almost guaranteed he was nothing more than a missile on a mission. Lord, by the time they were done there, they'd have triplets on the way.

"Why did you have to hurt Marcel?" She crossed her thin arms, probably in an effort to look intimidating. "He's been good to the girls."

Okay, so she screwed up his plans with the mention of the creep's name.

"He's not all bad."

"He's not all good, either." Tanner pointed out the obvious. "And he's using you."

"To bait you." She delighted in telling him what he already realized.

"It worked and it—obviously didn't."

She moved toward her luggage and threw it on the sofa. "I don't even know you anymore."

"Oh uh, Ally darling? The bedroom is over there. You can have it." He felt smug with the afterthought so he dared to add more. "We can share. You'll like the concept."

"The hell we can. We've never been able to meet on common ground before so why start now?" She went in for the kill. "There's nothing between us to share."

"Except our children, in case you forgot."

"I didn't forget."

"Good, because I'm not unaware of how they got here." He stalked her—time was up. He pursued her because he was hungry for only her and he planned to take her without another wasted minute spent arguing.

Her hand went up as soon as he moved. Maybe she meant to ward him off but he moved her manual obstacle out of his way. He didn't stall or take his time once he cleared his path. He swooped in and took those lips. He waited three years to claim them again and he fully intended to do it right this time.

Damn, did she ever taste good—until she ruined it with a slap straight across his left cheek. Well, he didn't exactly see *that* coming.

\* \* \* \*

Why did she have to kiss him back? If she just kept her mouth off his, then she wouldn't have to fight the passion, the loss of self-control.

If he would stay in his space, she wouldn't have to raise a cruel hand to him. *Cruel hand?* She must be

a loon—ready for the cuckoo bin and straight jacket. She used her palm to strike the skin of a common thug—a criminal with a record a mile long and she felt remorse? *Guilt, hell.*

"So, we play rough, do we?" He grabbed her wrist and practically tossed it over his shoulder before he pinned her other forearm firmly at his side. "I like a little turbulence and you damn well recognize when it's headed your way." His eyes held hers on a dare, a wager she would never win—never.

"Don't, Tanner."

"Don't tell me no because you and I both know you don't mean it. You never understood the definition or the way it can empower a woman, or a man. If you did, I swear you wouldn't have two little girls running around with my last name."

"They don't have your last name." She took pride in sparing no details then. "Would you like to know who has his name on the birth certificate?"

He was amused. "You are such a liar. I have their birth certificates." He chuckled. "Nice try, though."

"Bastard."

"Sexy."

"Son-of-a-bitch."

"Do you want me to say it? Because keep acting like one and we can name call all day." He held her tighter.

"Asshole."

He focused on her mouth. "Beautiful. Stunning. Spectacular."

"Criminal. Thug. Monster." She rolled with it then.

"Grasping now, aren't you?" He snickered. "You're all but fucked baby. In fact, I'm willing to bet you already feel me there." He moved to the *there* in question.

His declaration proved accurate because the heat he discovered once he moved his hand to check should've scorched the skin right off his fingers. "Good God woman, you've missed me." His lips went

to her neck and he nuzzled the skin right below her earlobe.

"I hate you." She was lying, of course—she always lied to him when she tried to fight him in a verbal battle she would never win. It might have been the last chance she had to save herself so she tried her best to sound believable. She didn't try hard enough.

If she wanted to redeem herself, it was too late. She could hardly deny him after he felt her, touched her intimately, and saw for himself how badly she still wanted him. She had one shot at walking away and she didn't have the first inclination to take her best one. Shit, she practically parted her legs when he cupped his hand under her.

"I love you." He held her head between his hands. "I didn't come back to the States to go home empty handed. I love you today and I'll love you more tomorrow. I've loved you for over half my life and one day soon you're going to be my wife, Ally. Mine."

She focused on his mouth like she didn't believe that he finally said what he should've said years ago. He probably saw what his admission did—weakened her. Maybe he was smarter than she gave him credit for. Were his words for temporary and immediate gain or did he mean them?

She jerked. She knew the truth. Tanner meant every word. If Ally believed in anything at all, she trusted in Tanner's love for her. He'd gone to extreme measures to prove how much he cared, as much as a man could when he loved from a distance.

His sentiments calmed her. Those three little words all but won the war for him. *Damn it, she might as well bend over now.* He at least had the decency not to tell her to touch her toes. Even though, knowing Tanner, he already saw how much he'd broken down her defenses.

Well, the least she could do was reward him. For once he shut his mouth and kept the taunting to a minimum. Now maybe he could part those lips for all the right sensual purposes.

## Chapter Four

His mouth warned of the trouble straight ahead. Damn if he didn't taste better than the potential for sex itself. She just wanted him to kiss her, stay on her lips until the pain and hurt went away.

Sure, he was the cause of her heartache. He was also the only man with a viable remedy. He could completely cure her pain with one kiss, one touch, and God only knew what else.

He was corrupting her, making her eager to sin all over again. And in a matter of minutes, he'd take her back to that hotel room in Knoxville, to the place where they were before.

Ally was breathless. She pushed him aside, only to bring him right back. She grabbed his shirt collar and slammed against him with a hungry force. His hand moved between them, working to release the small buttons of his Oxford-style shirt. She wiggled out of her own clothing barriers, leaving his lips for a split second in order to tear the blouse over her head.

He stared at her chest. A throaty signal left his lungs and the growl was completely vile. "I bet you've been counting down the seconds, haven't you baby?"

"Don't," she warned, thinking she'd like it more if she could defy the urges building inside her, if she could postpone this for a little while, long enough to make Tanner break a sweat and grovel like hell.

He smirked and that pissed her off. If Tanner Dorsey knew anything at all, he undoubtedly understood she would never deny him. That hadn't changed. Three years did nothing but kindle the desire. The time apart further flamed the longing.

Before she could slow things down, Tanner pursued her with more aggression and a forward hand. His fingers waltzed over the lace covering her

breasts and before she had the opportunity to stop him, he released the clasp.

His lips moved over her neck and face. Then, he eyed what the fallen material left revealed. "Fuck me."

She grinned. Now, she had him as much as he had her.

"I forgot how—"

"No you didn't," she said, flippantly. "It's one of the reasons you love me."

His upper lip curled and he grabbed her hips. "I have many reasons."

"Stop, Tanner."

"Baby you should've thought of saying no and meaning it long before we went this far. Now, there's no way in hell I won't love you. I need you in my bed and I want you there—now."

And he thought she wanted to stop this? Good God, she couldn't get him inside her fast enough!

His thighs bunched and knees bent. He gathered her in his arms, pulling her closer in an effort to let her feel his erection. When he straightened his legs, she was cradled against him. He carried her to bed with lust in his eyes and determination in his kiss. Her arm curved around his neck and she lost herself to the moment.

"Tanner, please..."

"I plan to please. Count on it." Before she whispered anything more, his lips fed from hers. This is what they'd missed, what they'd lived without for far too long.

His mouth consumed the lingering animosities. His kiss took away the pain.

He kissed her until her judgment was clouded. She was thinking about the possibilities, the kind of life she might have with Tanner and her girls. Oh yes, she wanted him, she needed him, and damn it to hell, she still loved him.

Ally would always love him.

She grabbed his arms, dragging his body closer to hers and running her fingers through his soft curls. Her responses gave him the green light. There was nothing and no one to stop them now.

Ally wanted him lower, planting a few of those hot and spicy kisses on her breasts. She continued to run her splayed hand through his wavy hair. She wanted to pull a few locks, wrap them around her fingers and then pull his hair, just to make sure he was real and this was happening.

She pushed down on his shoulders, guiding him. Maybe he'd follow her lead without further directions. He looked up and shot her a devilish grin. "I don't need any help."

"Then don't make me crazy," she bit out.

"That's exactly what I'm going to do," he promised, mumbling against her skin.

Tanner bypassed the breasts she fully expected him to devour and his tongue swirled down her stomach. He stopped at her belly button, traced the parameter, licked in and flicked out, and then moved further south, positioning himself between her legs. Good Lord, she needed more.

He toyed with the waistband of her tight skirt and took teasing to a whole new level. Carefully, stroking the skin only the fabric once touched, he played for several minutes and made the seconds he spent there count.

Now she was dripping wet and ready for him. The first bead of sweat formed on her brow just as he decided to be kind enough to rid them of the last barriers they had—her skirt, his pants, and their shoes. She was dying to consume him and eager to be consumed.

When he moved beside her once more, he started at her ankle and kissed his way up her inner thigh. He kissed her mound and licked through her folds, a slow and diabolical swipe, and just one which only made her crazy for more.

"The prettiest woman in the world with a sexy little snatch to match," he said, offering the compliment and granting himself full access to the pussy he intended to claim, twirling his fingers through her damp folds and barely pressing inside.

Tanner left her then and towered over her. His fingers played at her entrance and he acted as if he wasn't even interested in what his hand worked to achieve. That's when he kissed her again.

He nibbled on her lips and licked the texture while his fingers did damning things to her pussy. First he pinched her folds. He traced them. He rolled the little button sure to set her off and then stroked her with a firm hand. "What's wrong Ally? Do you need me, or do you want me? Tell me which one?"

"Both." She arched, rolling her hips toward the empty air. It didn't do a lot for her. She reached for her pussy but he smacked away her hand.

"Let me," he whispered, moving his mouth to her breast.

The slow show of affection was set to begin.

Ally closed her eyes. She soaked in the pleasure and with it came the sudden change of heart. Damnation, she loved him. What he did to her with his lips and hands would make her plead and beg, grovel for more because Tanner Dorsey was that kind of man. But more than the pleasure he brought her, she loved him.

"That's so sweet," he crooned, dropping his head between her legs. He fucked her with his fingers, taking her into a complete frenzy.

Her back bowed. His lips pressed against her pussy. His mouth ran only a temporary interference for fingers, one she wouldn't dare oppose even if he drove her to the brink of one orgasm after another—and he would.

He did.

Her hands felt numb. Her body shook. The waves were coming and all she could do was grip the bedspread under her.

His tongue traced the shape of her pussy lips and he used his thumb, applying the right amount of pressure to her clit.

Tanner's mouth covered the little pearl and drew it in for an exhilarating lapping before he released her and plunged his tongue straight into her core.

"Oh God Tanner. Don't stop, you can't...stop." Her ass shot straight off the bed.

Tanner's heavy forearm landed across her middle. He sucked her clit, licked her pussy, and pinned her to the mattress, taking what she gave him permission to take, and letting her ride his tongue like a woman might ride her lover's cock. Only, when she came, he was far from done.

\* \* \* \*

"Holy fucking world." The remains of her pleasure still simmered on his tongue. There was no waiting. He had to have her whether she was ready for him or not. They needed a more satisfying encore.

Her wild eyes widened and damn it all, he had to stay locked in them while he fucked her. Using his knee to spread her, he pushed her legs apart, fisting his cock before lowering himself to her vagina.

When he finally drove into her tight walls, he found nothing but a drenched, tight wet space. "Good damn, you feel so right, Ally."

"You could've waited," she said barely breathing and adjusting to his size. The struggle was apparent in her eyes.

He should've felt guilty, only he didn't. He wanted her to feel a small amount of pain so she would always remember the pleasure to follow.

"I've waited three years. It's not an option now." His cock proved his point. She'd already taken three orgasms. It was his turn.

His penis moved inside her. He took her with some measure of force and she let him have her, scraping those long nails across his chest and down his arms.

One stroke and then another. "Fuck me." He mumbled his request against her lips and picked up the pace. Her legs wrapped around him and their bodies slapped together.

Fucking mercy, her calves alone were strong enough to put a choke hold around his back and her snug little snatch only offered his cock more of the same. He died a thousand deaths right there in her arms and he lived a hundred lives, stroking between her legs.

"Only you, Ally," he promised her. "Always, it's always been only you."

He bit down on his bottom lip. The explosion was coming. He shoved one of her knees up, taking the opportunity to gain a better angle and position, pushing inside her, thrusting and fucking. God, he had to go higher!

"Now, Tanner!"

"Not a problem," he growled. He stroked her. He had a deliberate goal and they would achieve a beautiful end result. "That's it baby, come with me, let me feel you."

She fingered her nipples and looked down at their connection, watching as he pounded inside her. Damn it to hell, she knew how to rock a man's world.

His cock twitched, dripping out the last signs of pleasure's best. Thank heavens, he was still the only man who understood just how good things could be when they came together and truly set things right between them.

He buried his head in Ally's neck and choked back the tears he never wanted her to see him shed. "Now, we're back where we belong, Ally. See how easy that was?"

Only it wasn't and he knew that. He heard her breath catch, the whimper and the soft cries. He suspected the tears fell on her flushed cheeks and he continually tried to resist his own. He held her as close as he could and stroked her hair, refusing to let her go down the trail of their broken hearts all alone.

There would be love, but there would be more heartache. It was the way things were between them and he had no idea how to change their relationship when they each had their place—on opposite sides of the law.

How could he make things better for his family in the future? He would think about their tomorrows later. Right then, he was going to focus on their time together and do everything in his power to make the most of it, because soon, Ally would be gone.

## Chapter Five

Her cell phone rang. It was three o'clock in the morning and someone wanted to know where she was. She didn't have to guess who.

Tanner grabbed the phone from the nearby nightstand and looked at the facing. "Don't get it."

"You want me to ignore Marcel?"

"Damn straight."

"That makes me look guilty."

"Too bad." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe you're damned if you do and damned if you don't but the truth is Ally, once you had my children, you're guilty by association. It's high time you choose a side and stand there with your feet firmly planted on the ground."

She swallowed. "Did you want me to terminate the pregnancy, Tanner?"

In the dim light, she saw the wide-eyed look of shock. "Hell, no. It never crossed my mind. Never." He rolled out of bed and retrieved his pants. He had trouble fastening them. "Ever tried to zip up a hard-on?" He really wasn't asking her but rather making her notice he still had one—like she missed it.

"Can't say that I have. Is that all you ever think about?"

"Honestly?" He sat down on the bed moving his arm over her stomach and then supporting himself by resting his palm flat against the mattress right next to her hip. "When you're around, it's the norm. Even when you're not, it's an ongoing problem."

"I doubt that."

"It's true. I can't tell you how many cold showers I've suffered through all because of you and never mind the personal hand jobs. Now *those* got old."

"You haven't gone without, Tanner," she grumbled. "You always have the pick of the litter."

She didn't want to think about it either. Thinking about Tanner with other women made her jealous. She tossed back the sheet and hurried for her clothes. Once she stood, he let out a long whistle and pulled her back to him.

"I didn't get the chance for a repeat performance the first time we were together but now, Ally, I want more. I want to wake up with you in my arms after falling fast asleep with you beside me. I need to hear you breathe and listen to your heartbeat next to mine. I want our girls to run in on Saturday morning and tell us all about the cartoons they're watching while begging for a boat ride. I want you, Ally and I don't know how many ways I can say it."

He pretty much shared more than she ever expected. And the way his eyes flickered with sincerity made her pay closer attention to the man Tanner had become. Why she had to go and ruin a good thing was anyone's guess but it was just the way they were when they were together. "I'm sure you can find a replacement or two. Plenty of women are capable of satisfying you. Remember, you told me once, you shared with several."

His mouth locked over hers before she moved the moment into an act of combat. His tongue struck a brisk tempo simulating a lust-filled sex act. He lavished her with one of the most memorable kisses she'd ever enjoyed. When he was through, he held her by the forearms and drew back to study her face. "There. Now shut up. I have something to tell you."

She narrowed her gaze. She couldn't wait to hear this.

"I *was* a player. You knew what you had when you got me, but Ally, look at me. Hear me," he encouraged, taking her hand.

Her heart set off at a record pace, thumping against her chest wall until she felt quite euphoric, like she was floating on air. Had Tanner given up all his wayward ways for the sake of true feelings for her?

"After we were together, I..." He seemed unable to finish. Finally, he blurted out, "Let's just say I have a true understanding of the blue-balls concept and I've developed an intimate relationship with my left hand."

She leapt from the bed. "Tanner, I don't know whether I believe you or not. Three years is a long time."

"Ten years could pass. It doesn't matter. I haven't fucked another woman since I had the only woman I've ever wanted in my arms and in my bed. To have sex with someone else, to be with another woman while you were pregnant with my babies seemed—well, scratch it."

At some point, she turned her back to him and he must've slid to the side of the bed so he could reach for her when he wanted to drive home a point. She clutched her blouse and was about to make her way to the bathroom when he placed his hands on both sides of her waist and brought her back to him. Standing behind her, his fingers trailed down her waist and hips. "Love me, Ally." He whispered in her ear. "Love me like you've always wanted to love me."

"I can't." She whispered back.

"You can. Oh baby, I know you can."

She faced him then. "Tanner, I have a career. I'm on the task force to bring you down. Do you understand this? I'm paid to fight the very thing you stand for and I am an agent with the FBI. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"You mean everything to me. I don't care if you're an agent with the FBI. I had you before they did." He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead before adding something more—one more statement to drive home a valid point. "And you need me more than you'll ever need them."

\* \* \* \*

Ally came out of the bathroom fully dressed. Tanner smirked as soon as he saw her. "You shouldn't

have bothered with clothes. Lose them." His expression held nothing but raw ass rebellion. "Quickly." He yanked the sheet back and nodded in the direction of hard evidence. "I have an urgent problem. You can solve it."

"I have to take care of something so it'll have to wait." She looked around the cabin and then casually walked out the door. "Can I have the keys?"

"What the hell?" Tanner stroked himself. "You're really going to leave me here like this?"

"Dear God, Tanner. I'm not going to leave you here. I just need to run an errand."

"Fuck!." He jumped up and slid into his pants. "Fine I'll take you. We need to lay low though, Ally. We're on the run together now, you know." He waggled his brows like he liked the sound of that.

"I need to make a call and check in with Marcel, If I don't touch base, he'll get suspicious don't you think?"

"Nah, I don't think he'll be too interested in talking to you." With a tongue in cheek, he finally said, "It's time to choose, Ally. You know what waits for you with him and you have a pretty good idea of what I can give you."

"What can you possibly give me that Marcel won't?" She wondered why she even bothered. Tanner knew she didn't care for Marcel. He had to know.

"For starters, I have our girls."

"You bastard."

"You got it," he said, shrugging into his T-shirt. "I don't want to be an ass, Ally. But where the girls are concerned, I will be. I've missed out on three years. I'm not missing anything else."

"What happened to the man who promised he would never hurt me or take my children?"

"I was counting on you to see things my way. I felt like we could reach a mutual understanding together but make no mistake, if we can't, I'll take them before I'll let you take them back to Marcel."

"You don't want to come to a compromise, Tanner. You just want your way."

"Exactly," he stated flatly. The room went silent. The only thing heard was the hum of the heating and cooling unit. "Let me ask you something. And I want the truth."

She actually wondered what took him so long. Tanner was obsessive and it would eat him alive until he found out the truth straight from her. He may have had bodyguards on her around the clock but he had no way of knowing exactly what happened behind a closed and locked bedroom door. He had to ask if he wanted to find out everything.

"Did you sleep with him?" He scanned her body with a careful eye. "Did you let him in your bed, Ally?"

"Is that what you think?" Her heart shattered in a million pieces when she saw the truth in his eyes. Evidently, he thought it might be a possibility.

"He lived with you."

"He lived with *us*," she snapped, understanding Tanner had been there with her all along. His surveillance and bugging devices were as elaborate as the agency's equipment.

Tanner shook his head. "Uh-huh, that's where you're wrong. When Marcel moved in, I moved out."

"What do you mean?"

"I couldn't stand the thought of him touching you and since you had the blatant audacity to move the man into *my* house, I assumed you planned to fuck him silly and make me stand by and listen to every grunt and giggle. I made the guys remove the bugs as soon as I heard the news.

Ally snorted and then laughed like crazy. It felt good to laugh until she cried, but it felt better to know that for a while, Tanner worried about who was in her bed as much as she'd worried who might have been in his.

"What's so funny?"

"I had the stupid audacity, huh?"

"Yeah, I worked hard to put you up in a nice home—one of the nicest, I might add and you thanked me by moving a man I loathe right in without thinking about how that might affect me." He rubbed his chin. "Yeah, Ally. I call that dumb."

Ally just loved the hell out of him right then. He made her pulse race and never mind what he did for inspiring uncontrollable arousal. He was just damn cute.

Delicious ideas crossed her dirty mind. She reminded herself that they needed to talk. Fucking all the time didn't work out differences or solve problems. Although, it was a delicious start, she had to admit.

She walked toward him. When she reached him, she pressed her open palm to his cheek. "Tanner, I've never been intimate with anyone but you."

"Well, you know, I thought so, but I had to know, you know—for sure."

"I waited on you most of my life. And unless you have a twin I don't know about—someone equally irresistible—then you probably don't have to worry about me." She winked. "You can bet on me, Tanner Dorsey."

"I would but you know me, I don't mix business with pleasure." He grabbed her and let out a long whistle. "I bet on everything but love, baby."

"Tanner, speaking of business, I really need to take care of something before I go."

His eyes lit up. "You're coming home with me, aren't you?"

"I'm not sure yet." She really didn't know. To go with Tanner meant to leave the FBI and the United States. To leave the States and flee with him to the Caribbean meant she would become an accessory, more or less, to everything her brothers and Tanner stood for and she worked against. She had a hard time with their lifestyle and their business.

"What can I do to convince you?" He asked, brushing a lock of hair away from her cheek. "I'll be

the man you want, Ally. Tell me what you need from me."

"I need you to tell me you aren't the man we've profiled," she retorted, holding her breath and praying for the first time in a long time. She couldn't bear it if he told her otherwise. It just didn't make sense. She didn't see Tanner as a killer.

"I can't do that." He looked away from her.

Ally walked around to stand in front of him. "Don't you dare turn away from me on this. If you're this man I've read all about, then you be the kind of man your cartel seems to think you are. You stand up and tell me why and what drives you to become this monster. You can at least do that for me."

He narrowed his gaze. "All right, have it your way. If you really want to know, maybe it's time you saw me for who I really am." He walked over to the counter and retrieved his wallet. "Today seems like a fine time for you to meet the man you can't quite make me out to be."

## Chapter Six

The helicopter began its descent. Ally stared out the window, taking in the beauty of the Andes Mountain. They seemed to go on forever. One range immediately connected to another, forming the most spectacular natural jigsaw puzzle. "I have the best seat in the world."

Tanner pushed aside the passing explicit thoughts even though various individual acts came to memory one at a time. "The best seat you have is right here." He patted his erection bringing her attention to the bulging package practically stretching the threads of his thin slacks.

"Tanner, quit thinking about your cock and pay attention to this view."

"I've seen it several dozen times. You're more beautiful than any range of mountains, Ally."

Her smile warmed his heart. She reached for him and held his hand and in that moment, he was ruined. She tarnished his soul.

Tanner realized her smile would soon diminish. Why had he brought her there? In one breath, he wanted her to stay with him and in the next, he showed her all the reasons she should run and never look back.

It wasn't as simple as it seemed. The truth, in fact, was quite twisted. He wanted her to see what he did for a living and accept him anyway.

Time would tell but once they landed in Columbia, he fully expected time to become his enemy. Hell, it was never really his friend.

Ally asked the kind of questions he couldn't answer. It was better to introduce her to the side of him she'd have to see for herself. The face to face introduction would be hard to ignore. Only, he wasn't the face of the cartel, like she thought but then

again, he never wanted her to see her brothers for the men behind this madness. It was too dangerous. They had far too much to lose. And Ally would never give him up. He couldn't be so sure about David and Darren.

When the ground looked close enough to reach out and touch, the pilot made an announcement, babbling about landing, but Tanner was too lost in the moment to care. He studied Ally, the small lines around her eyes when she smiled, the delicate veins in her hands and wondered if he'd ever be able to protect her. She was fragile, but defiant and strong. She was an agent for crying shame, a fucking agent who could whirl a gun probably faster than his guys.

He wished their lives were different now. He'd started out as a simple rogue really. A gambling man—a bookie for the working class. Then everything went berserk. David and Darren craved more.

Ally's brothers took their business places Tanner never wanted to go. He was forced to carry some of the blame because he never turned business away, but he never wanted this. Now, he was one of the most feared drug lords in the world and the truth was—he wasn't even cartel material—the brother duo owned the titles affiliated with that part of the business more than he ever would. He kept his hands in booking games and it brought in more money than he'd ever need in his lifetime.

They landed right smack in the middle of a runway surrounded by armed guards. When they disembarked, Tanner hovered over her, tossing his arms over her head to protect her from the blades slowing down above them. He escorted her to an old truck, throwing up his hand to a few men he recognized.

Ally never showed a hint of apprehension and he was relieved. Fear, even from wives or significant others, showed weakness. Then again, his peers would perceive this as a tremendous lapse in judgment too. Tanner Dorsey never brought a woman

into Colombia and someone would want to know why he bothered now. He should've thought of that way before he ushered her to the dilapidated vehicle awaiting them.

"How far will we travel?" she asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Not far." He snapped his reply searching the terrain around them. They were protected by a convoy of trucks but Tanner still felt uneasy whenever he came to Colombia. Perhaps it was the nature of the business or maybe it was because he had Ally at his side.

A few short miles down a bumpy patch of road and the truck pulled up to a makeshift tent strategically located in front of rows upon rows of opium poppy crops. He saw the face of recognition and immediately noted it was one of true disgust.

The truck stopped right in front of the tent. Tanner was met by one of his employees. He was dressed as an American soldier. They made small talk and the man nodded in Ally's direction. His expression never changed—he wore the mask of unchallenged despair—like many others there.

Tanner directed Ally to the rear of the tent and there he waved his hand out as if to proudly introduce her to the other side of the law—the wrong side—the illegal throes of a very profitable drug trade. He tried to make light of it when he finally found the right words. "So, you wanted to know who I am. Who I am isn't who you will ever see again standing in these fields but if you want to know the man I've become, on a business level, then I'm standing here among the very tools of my trade."

Her eyes darted back and forth across the fields. "Heroin?"

"Yes."

"What else?"

"You want more?"

"I know there is more. Remember, I profiled you before I knew who was behind this secret drug cartel."

"You already know about the gambling and money laundering so what else do you want, Ally?" He realized what came next. Ally had morals and somewhere deep inside of her, she wanted to believe he still possessed a few principles too.

"I want to know about the murder for hire." She turned around and made a quick dash for the truck calling out over her back before she reached it. "And I want to go home—now!"

\* \* \* \*

Ally barely spoke to Tanner until they landed back in Tennessee. They'd traveled for nearly thirty hours and very few words passed between them. They were both exhausted and she needed sleep.

After she left the terminal at the airport, she picked up her pace and headed for the lower parking lot. She needed to put some space in between them.

"Ally?"

She turned on him quickly, spinning around to face him. "Not here. Not now."

"Okay, I can respect that. But you tell me, what now?"

"I don't know. I really don't. Right now, I'm going to call Marcel and have a private conversation with him and when I'm done, I'm trashing my cell phone. Then, I'll decide what comes next. You can wait for me in the car."

"I don't like waiting for my women."

"According to you, I'm the only woman for you so if that's true, get used to it—I'm worth the wait."

Tanner grunted and then slipped a kiss on her cheek, "I'll pull up to the front and pick you up."

She nodded. She watched him walk away and her eyes watered. He'd won again only this time, he'd only won part of his wager—not the entire gamble made.

Tanner had their girls. She felt confident he'd care for them and love them with everything he had to give. If she gave in and let him take her into his life, then she would lose everything she was and everything she ever hoped to become before her life spiraled out of control.

She watched Tanner until he disappeared and then she dialed Marcel. "It's me. I need help." She hurriedly explained what she wanted Marcel to know.

By the time she disconnected the call, she'd already changed her mind again. She couldn't live without Tanner. She'd tried before and failed miserably. Now, she just had a few decisions to make and those wouldn't be easy.

\* \* \* \*

An agent with the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation just happened to be on Alcoa Highway and he picked her up and gave her a lift to Nashville. Ally flew back to Florida later that afternoon.

Once she was back in the sunshine state, her heart was where it could effectively shatter beyond repair but her mind was made up.

When Marcel picked her up at the airport, she sprinted into his arms and there she found the comfort she'd actually been seeking from Tanner. Marcel wasn't her lover but for a split second in time, she wished, oh how she wished, he could become the man she craved, just so he could love Tanner completely away from her heart and out of her soul. It would have been so much easier to care for Marcel or someone like him.

"I'm glad to see you," she whispered into his shirt. "I'm so glad you're okay."

Taken by surprise, he kissed her forehead. "I don't think Dorsey had any intention of killing me, he just wanted your girls. I took a nasty bump on the head and that's pretty much it."

Ally tried to look surprised. "I don't think Tanner has *our girls*."

She emphasized 'our girls' as in the daughters Marcel helped her raise without their biological father around to do the job. And she knew he read it precisely as she'd intended. His hard expression immediately softened.

He brushed the fallen hair away from her eyes. "Ally, you look like you haven't slept for days." He rarely showed her compassion and part of the reason was because Marcel wasn't willing to tag second for the man on first. In the beginning, Ally continually turned him down for sex and each time assured him there would never be any kind of emotional connection between them. Apparently, he believed her because he didn't push the issue. Even when he proposed marriage, he told her he remained on common ground and understood the platonic terms.

"Take me home," she purred, glancing over his shoulder and noticing the very man who had been hired to kidnap her daughters. She ought to arrest him right then but what was the point?

He snapped one shot after another. Ally didn't have the energy to pose for him but she would help him earn his keep. She placed her mouth to Marcel's ear and made promises she didn't plan to make good on but wanted him to believe if only for a captured show. A camera lens could translate many things and she wanted the translation to benefit her—at least for now.

"Once I get my girls back, I want us to talk about taking our relationship to the next level." She kissed his earlobe and gained the reaction she hoped she would—for Tanner's sake. "I missed you, Marcel." She added the last part to ensure the appropriate response and as if to drive home the point a bit more, she bumped against him mashing her breasts against his broad chest.

"You did?" he asked, practically coming in his pants, if she cared to guess. "Since when do you miss me?"

"Don't make a big deal out of it," she said, thinking she had a lot of work to do if she wanted to convince Marcel she didn't believe Tanner had her daughters. If she could do that successfully, everything else she planned to set in motion would be simple.

He pulled away from her. Marcel wasn't an idiot and reading people well helped him nab the position he coveted and wore like a medal of honor.

A supervisor with the FBI's Internal Affairs, Marcel's intelligence intrigued her more so than his sex appeal, but Marcel was an incredibly sexy man. Most women craved his touch. Ally wasn't one of them.

Since moving in with her and the girls, Marcel's hatred for Tanner and her brothers had only deepened. For some reason, Ally suspected there was something more to the mutual feelings, something her brothers and Tanner wouldn't tell her. A truth Marcel didn't want to share.

Marcel retrieved a cigar from his pocket and chewed on the end, studying her through narrowed eyes. "I hope you're serious Ally, because I know exactly what you need when we get home."

"I hope so because I could use a little TLC." She continued with the charade.

"Leave it to me," he said, opening her door. When he backed away from her, the cigar dangled from his lips and he rubbed his hand over the front of his slacks. "Damn you Ally, you'd better not be playing me. I've waited a long time to have you in my bed and after dealing with your ex, I'm in no mood for games."

Her breath hitched in her chest right as he slammed the car door. She could only hope things played out like she wanted them to or else she would have to give Marcel the affection and attention he seemed to want. And if that happened, her plan would come completely apart at the seams.

Marcel behind the wheel and slammed the doo. "So are you going to tell me where the girls are?"

Her tears came on command. "I don't know! I just know he doesn't have them."

The test of piercing eyes came next and when he glared at her, she understood what purpose he had. He wanted to read her mind and as if he did, he started the vehicle and patted her shoulder. "I'll get them back wherever they are. I'll pull out all the stops to do it."

He bit.

She continued to sniff, dabbing at her eyes. She could rest easy now because the plan she needed to put in motion was well underway.

By the time they arrived at her home—the estate Tanner bought for her before he left the states—she was in a deep sleep. She vaguely recalled Marcel carrying her to bed.

His hands undressed her, but she didn't even care when he lingered at her breasts for far longer than a gentleman might have. She was numb, completely numb.

She'd been in and out of the country and across several states. She needed to rest. Marcel could feel her up or down. Hell, he could fuck her for all she cared. She didn't have the faintest interest in moving. Her heart continued to break as she dozed off and embraced sleep.

Tanner Dorsey was the criminal the FBI believed him to be and all she wanted to do was disappear. At the same time, she couldn't wait until she fell asleep in Tanner's arms again.

No wonder she was so uptight all the time. She was in love with a thug and hiding behind her badge like the metal she wore would protect her heart and save her soul. And what about Tanner? Who would save him? She knew the answer to that better than anyone.

## Chapter Seven

Breathing was damn near impossible until Tanner returned home. There, he found life again. Whatever he seemed destined to miss with Ally, he would find in his little girls. They were full of life—much like their mother or at least, the way she used to be before he stripped her of the ability to live her life to the fullest.

Much to Tanner's surprise, Molly and Holly took up with David more than anyone else. Ally's mother was closing in on eighty years old and spent most of her days in bed. Although, she looked better with her granddaughters toddling around. Her eyes danced with love as she watched them.

Tanner crept up on them poolside. "Momma?" For years Tanner had referred to Mrs. Stephens as Mother or Momma because she'd been like a mother to him and he adored her. Since he'd been so distanced from Ally, he'd gone the extra mile to take care of her—for Ally.

She jumped up from her seat and clasped her hands together as if to clap in celebration but once she read his expression, her eyes dropped and the excitement disappeared "She's not with you?"

He shook his head.

"But she's coming, right?"

"I don't think so." Tanner shrugged off his despair and turned to watch his little angels as they played in the elaborate kiddie pool he had installed specifically for them.

"My daddy." They both chirped his name at the same time and pointed.

Mrs. Stephens smiled. "It appears my daughter showed these two countless photographs because they are very familiar with their father. They've

pointed you out in the pictures here without any trouble."

Tanner kicked off his shoes and rolled up his pants so he could go wade in the water with his little daughters. "Yes, that's right. I'm your daddy."

They both agreed again. "My daddy."

"Yes, I'm your daddy." He would never tire of hearing the sweetest word known to man.

One of the twins quickly showed him a boat while the other hit him on the shin with a plastic doll. "You must be Molly."

She giggled and hit him again. Ally told him she was an aggressive little tyke but she failed to tell him she could be rotten to the core. Mischief existed in her eyes and he just wanted to pick her up and squeeze her until he possessed some of the impishness for himself. He thought better of it when she turned away, reaching for David.

"Watch it, Tanner," David warned. "Before you think those two are just eager to be held and loved, remember whose children they are and wait until they get to know you."

Molly cried then. She held her arms up and squealed, David shook his head. "I love these two but understand, I didn't sign on for kids." He kicked his shoes off and held his arms out. "Come on. Come over here to Uncle David." He watched as the kid sat down with a splash right in the center of the pool. "What did I tell ya? She's her mother's child through and through."

Tanner tousled her hair and started to lift her out of the water but a little hand emerged from the water and she smacked his cheek.

He held her arm, loosening his grip when fear washed over her face. "No, Molly."

Her tears came in droves then. She squealed out and splashed around like crazy. She reached for David again. "Uncle David!"

"I don't think they've had a lot of discipline," David pointed out, plucking the little one from the water and wrapping her in a huge beach towel.

"Probably about as much as her mother had." Tanner winked at Mrs. Stephens.

"Then she's had her backside paddled a few times," Mrs. Stephens said proudly.

"I doubt it." Tanner studied Holly—the quieter one.

"Would you like to swim with daddy?" He held his hands out and to his surprise, the little girl reached for him warming his heart in the same spot her mother had undoubtedly bruised.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, the men met to discuss Tanner's royal fuck-up. He could hardly wait to hear the brutal butt-chewing he deserved.

Darren slammed his tumbler down on the bar. "You dumb fucking ass." He wheeled around to face Tanner when he walked into the study with David right on his heels.

Tanner glared at the brothers. "She wanted to know who she was aligning herself with and I took her to Colombia."

Darren brought the glass to his lips again and gulped his drink before returning it to the bar with one more forceful slam. "You're a stupid fuck, Tanner."

David rubbed his chin. "Are you just trying to send us all to prison?"

"I'm trying to get you off the hook. She thinks the entire cartel is mine. She doesn't know the two men she claims for brothers are the very men *she* profiled."

Darren's gaze narrowed. "Why would you do that? Why would you let her think you're the only one with dirty hands?"

David answered for him. "Because she would turn us in but she would never hand him over. Never." He seemed chilled by the realization. "Right, Tanner?"

"I took a chance that might be the case and I guess if she's going to come for any of us, she'll take me, but I admit it I don't think she'd ever roll over on me."

"I hope to hell and back that you're right," Darren said.

The bottle of scotch called to all of them. Darren poured himself another. David followed suit and Tanner was right behind them. The men drank in silence. They consumed the whole bottle of single malt whiskey and left the room one by one.

## Chapter Eight

Marcel left her a note on the kitchen counter along with a dozen long stem white roses. "I'll hold you to all those long overdue promises. Last night, you deserved sleep—but tonight, you'll never find it."

Ally glanced at the clock. She practically slept the day away. She had less than seven hours to get things together. Marcel typically worked ten hour days but he might come home early with the promise of sex lingering in the air.

Releasing a long sigh, she pulled her thoughts together and planned her escape. She wanted to leave Florida with as few loose ends as possible.

She missed her girls and she longed for more time with Tanner. The thought of them kept her eyes moist with tears.

Tanner was out there waiting for her but if she wanted to make a clean break, she needed to do this without leading someone straight to them. She went out to her car and opened up the glove compartment. She retrieved a cell phone no one knew she had and she dialed her brother's number. She'd committed it to memory and promised to only dial it in case of an emergency.

Immediately, David's voice mail picked up. "I'm taking the long way home," she promised in codes. "I'll see you when I see you. Tell Tanner. I'll be out in six, close it down here." She thought back to the words Tanner once used and tried to use their lingo.

They would probably guess she wouldn't have time to do everything the right way so they would transfer her money and make her transition smooth once they got the message. With any luck, they'd know where to find her. She could only hope.

Taking a deep breath, she shoved the phone back in the glove compartment and simply spoke to the

empty garage. "It's time to find out where my heart really belongs."

\* \* \* \*

Ally walked into the Alcoa Hilton alone. She looked up at the rooms overlooking the open atrium and released a tortured sigh. She hoped like hell someone knew where she headed when she left Florida but she had absolutely no way of knowing for sure.

She left one message for David and she'd made sure to drive slowly to the airport in case Tanner's tails were following her. For once, she hoped they were on her like glue.

When she approached the airline ticket counter, she'd made her request known by loudly requesting a flight to Knoxville, Tennessee just in case one of his men stood close enough to listen. She acted like a paranoid lunatic checking over her shoulder, speaking to everyone and yet no one in particular. Finally, she had reached her destination. Her no end situation started there, in a sense and the new beginning would begin there too if Tanner came for her and he would, if he knew where to find her.

She stepped onto the elevator and rode it to floor number five. She stepped out and looked down over the same atrium she'd just left. She found her room, the one she once shared with Tanner.

She withdrew her key from her purse. She heard it click before the arrow connected with the magnetic latch or whatever the hell the keycards did to unlock the door. On instinct, she reached for her gun, forgetting she hadn't packed one in her belt.

Her mind raced and her heart pounded. Her forehead went to the door, right above the peephole and she let out a sigh of relief. "You're here. I can already feel you."

He opened the door wide and with a quick yank, grabbed a firm hold on her forearm and pulled her inside. "You little liar. You just heard the lock give

and knew I was the only one charming enough to convince housekeeping to let me in."

\* \* \* \*

"You could've met me downstairs or called me at the airport or..."

"Shut up," he said, stealing away with the first kiss. His hands went to work at the speed of light. He unzipped her jeans, tore away the snap and pushed her pants down to her ankles in one sleek move.

She practically tripped out of her panties while he uncurled her fingers from the luggage she held, ensuring she didn't head to bed with her suitcase. He kicked off his loafers, stripped his shirt away from his intoxicating body and wasted little time making sure they were both naked in record time.

The evidence of unspent passion demanded attention. After everything, she'd weighed out in her mind—the good, the bad, the sinfully delicious, and yes—the love—she couldn't wait to start her life with Tanner.

Backing up to the bad, her knees met the mattress and she motioned for him with a crooked finger. "Come here."

Shaking his head, he grunted. "Not a chance. After you left me standing at the airport, I plan to wear your ass out, in more ways than one."

"You'll have to catch me first!" Playfully, she swung a pillow in his direction and crawled up the bed. He caught her without much effort.

His grunt was carnal, explicit. His growl more animalistic than dominant and the hand he raised prompted recognition.

Tanner meant every word he said. He planned to spank her and she arched her back anticipating the first strike.

Before his hand came down across her bottom, he smoothed his palm over her ass. "I should fuck you first just to settle down my growing problem. It would take the ache away."

"I doubt it, but I'd love to find out." She flipped over and stared up at him.

He brushed a curl away from her brow. "Marry me."

She opened her mouth but nothing came out. She was too afraid to form words and almost scared of what she might say. She might try to talk him out of it and she certainly didn't want to do that.

He kissed her, dropping a real good smooch right on her parted lips. He framed her face and acted like he had all day and all night to convince her.

When their lips separated, he said, "You'll never be bored with me, Ally. I'll make it worth your trouble. Every day of your life I'll make up for the hours you spent loving enough for both of us." His hand propelled across her belly, the once perfectly taut stomach now somewhat spoiled by his seed but the two daughters they created made it well worth the imperfection of slightly flawed skin. Only a tiny stretch mark served as a reminder of any children born.

She'd waited a lifetime to hear him propose never fully expecting to hear permanent words of endearment. Now, she wasn't entirely sure what she wanted to do about them.

"Come on, Ally. Say yes." He wanted an answer. Since she didn't have one, she slid her hand down to his cock, realizing if she provoked him to distraction, she'd have time to analyze her marriage to a criminal. Up and down, she pulled at him until his desire left nothing to the imagination and nothing to mere chance.

\* \* \* \*

Tanner gritted his teeth and stilled his focus against tight little nipples beaded to perfection. She wasn't going to answer so he would paddle her little ass until she knew what it felt like to be so sexually aroused that the need factor truly outweighed the want factor. He dipped his hand under her pussy and

applied pressure to the small of her back, turning her over.

Stretched out over his bended knees, her full breasts mashed against his bare skin. He opened his palm and flattened his hand on her round behind. He snapped his wrist, almost popped it really, and delivered the first of several slaps across her rear. She moaned and the oohs and ahs guaranteed he wouldn't hear a formal complaint.

The fact that she didn't whine or whimper only drove his desire. His hand raked over her ass and he caressed her right thigh. Fisting his cock, he moved his length along her leg allowing her to feel the strength of his need.

"Feel me, Ally," he muttered, tempting her desire.

"I feel you," she promised, spreading her legs and rubbing herself against him.

He stroked her hair, whispered into her ear, and made more promises, oaths he hoped would forever remain in her heart.

\* \* \* \*

"You'll love me until you die, Ally. And that's the only reason, the lone excuse I have for leading you away from the life you've always known. If you don't follow me, you'll never lose me but you'll lose a bit of yourself each day. You can survive without me but with me, you'll thrive. I'll make sure you do," he whispered.

"Tanner," she said, arching her neck and craving his lips.

"You'll have everything you want, everything you need and you'll always, always have me." His fingers traveled down her back. They were followed with his kiss and that's when she too made the promises he wanted her to keep.

"Yes," she said softly. Her voice cracked at first but she wanted to be sure he heard her. "Yes."

"Yes?" He arched a brow. "What took you so damn long to give me an answer?" He worked her

over with a sensual massage before bringing her over him, encouraging her to straddle him. Her body towered over his and he remained in a seated position letting her take the lead, enjoying the way her lips fed from his.

The kiss by itself proved love could be made with two tongues as much as two slapping bodies but once he slid his cock beyond her slit, his strokes came hard and went deep. They came together as one. They were practically exploding before penetration, the undeniable love and lust crashing together and mixing up an uncertain cocktail of things to come.

They rode out wondrous waves of ecstasy and with shouts of pleasure, fell against the bed, entangled in one another's arms.

He patted her behind and stroked her cheek. "Now then, now you can rest easy." He kissed the top of her head and closed his eyes.

They stayed there together for a while, maybe an hour when suddenly, as if Ally were jolted out of her sleep, she sat straight up in bed. "How long have you been here?"

"Why?"

"It's important. Answer me. Did you even go home?"

Before he answered, she saw the proof words didn't need to support. "I did."

She crossed her legs Indian style and her knees hit his side. "They're beautiful aren't they?"

He dropped his focus to her chest and licked his lips. "You'd better believe it. The best set I've ever laid eyes on and that's a solemn promise. Why do you think I want to marry you?"

She used one knee and gouged him in the ribs. "Not my breasts, damn it."

Snickering, he propped himself up against the headboard. "They're perfect. Just like their mother." He grabbed her wrist and brought her to him. Tangling his hands in her hair, he said, "I should've been there for you, Ally."

He should've been but that was water under the bridge. "Did you spend some time with them?"

"I did." His smile spread into one of pure pride. "Molly is like her mother and damn it all, she's going to be crazy about your brother. She won't let him out of her sight."

"Really? Darren and Molly bonded?"

"Nope. She's taken up with David. Follows him around like he's her playmate and she's driving him a little nuts."

"I'll be darned." A southern expression fell from her lips and she grinned even more. "I never expected David to take an interest in children."

Tanner winked. "Molly didn't ask for permission, she just decided she liked him best and she goes with him everywhere. Your mother said she's slept in his room since she's been there. She starts out in her room but at some point during the night, she ends up on his floor as close to the bed as she can get."

"I would've never thought they would've connected."

Ally's eyes narrowed. His darkened.

"What is it?" she asked.

Tanner swallowed hard and as if to change the subject, he dragged his finger between her breasts. "I want you happy. That's all."

"We'll get through this and we'll be happy." She wasn't entirely sure. She loved the FBI and loved working on the right side of the law but now it seemed she'd made a swap for the sake of love. She'd adjust. She'd have to in order to stay close to her family.

"Ally, you know what we are and after our little trip to Colombia, I think you know what we represent."

The thud in her chest wasn't her beating heart but rather a dagger chiseling straight through the bone surrounding it. She changed the subject back to her original question. "You never answered me. How long have you been here?"

He wrapped his hand around the nape of her neck. "How long do you think?"

"I think you went home, wherever home is now, and you played with the girls. Then, I think you waited for the call and once you had it, you came back here."

"What call?" he asked, concern settling in his cheeks. "I didn't get a call."

"The one from your photographer?" she said solemnly. "I think you said his name is Bob."

Tanner sat upright, and held her away from him. "Ally, Bob is with the twins. He hasn't left them since he brought them to us because he was a familiar person they recognized. We didn't want them to feel like they were surrounded by complete strangers."

She rubbed her temple. "Maybe I had him mixed up with one of your other tails, then."

Tanner started to say something but stopped.

She caught it. "So Bob didn't make the call but you got one, right? Otherwise you wouldn't have known to come back here, right?"

"Baby, I know you so well that I knew when I walked out of that airport to get the car that you weren't going to be waiting on the sidewalk when I pulled back around. It's why I never looked back when I walked away from you."

"I came back here with full intentions of waiting on you whether I waited a day, a week or a month. I knew when you were ready, you'd come back here. I took a gamble that you were sentimental enough to check into the same room where I tamed this pretty little pussy of yours." He slapped the one in question.

"Tame?" Her hand went to his cock and she had no problem working it into an upright and appreciative stance. "You didn't *tame* anything." She moved his hand to her mound and his fingers found their place just as her palm found him ready for anything—unlimited pleasures, carnal sins, and a wild ride worth remembering.

## Chapter Nine

Whatever he saw in her eyes, he pushed it aside, stealing kisses for as long as he'd let her. His lips sealed hers. She closed her eyes and he made the moment his, indulging in the flavor and texture of her soft mouth.

He nipped at her mouth. The new hunger grew.

She may not have wanted to leave her life behind but what he offered her, what he could give her wouldn't be enough and he understood it now more than ever before. When she left the FBI, when all ties were cut, she would make a full leap to the other side and that terrified him.

Ally needed the adventure and she would find plenty in their lifestyle. She craved the adrenaline and the rush his business brought would be the closest things in comparison to what she left behind.

He kissed his way down her stomach to the place where he rightfully belonged, if for no other reason than to lap up the juices of disturbance. A tight pussy closed him off at first but he had her, just as soon as he stretched her with another probing finger.

He lapped at her swollen pussy lips, twirling his fingers deeper inside her. She pulsed with excitement, drenching his tongue with every indication she was ready to come. He worked into her intimate space, following behind his intrusive fingers, demanding entry and accepting the loving invitation when she opened her legs.

He gave her slow licks. She moaned and whimpered.

He thrust. She pulled his hair and wrapped a shaking leg around the back of his neck.

He indulged. Heaven help him, did he ever.

She rode out one orgasm and then another. He didn't complain, but she would.

He kissed her clit and deserted her only to reenter her quickly, thrusting his cock high inside her channel and fucking her with intentions of never stopping until they reached the other side of the day.

The sunset would allow him to leave her under the cover of night but before he said good-bye this time, he wanted to fuck her as long as she had the initiative to let him and by the looks of things, she was ready to go all night.

"You feel so fucking hot, baby." His cock was a perfect fit, snugly tucked inside her folds. Oh God, what was he doing to them? Why would he propose and then leave her?

He hammered between her legs. She became a blur. He gripped her hands and dropped his head to her nipple, licking the point, tasting her, becoming a part of her. Harder, he entered her, fuck yeah, he wanted to stay there, make her remember this, force her to take all she could take and then cry out when she felt the ramifications of his hot release.

Maybe he'd impregnate her. Maybe, just maybe! Good God, he was a sick bastard. He wanted to love and leave her again. Even now?

He squeezed his eyes shut. The future Ally played out in his head. She'd be just like David and Darren, toting guns and ready to fight. No! He didn't want that for her. He wanted her like this. Pure and sweet like honey or syrup.

Her body milked him. Ah yes, definitely like syrup.

"Tanner, come!"

He jerked. Struggling with his release, he cursed himself for taking her like this. God help him, because he couldn't help himself. He wanted to lose himself inside her body.

"Tanner, please," she pleaded.

"Not yet," he bit out. "Don't move." He growled, drawing her against his chest. His back rose from the mattress and he sat up with her. Her body shifted and

her feet flattened against his lower back. She sat erect, beautifully displayed across his lap.

He never left her. His cock thrummed inside her. "You're so fucking wet, baby." He mumbled the words against her neck, pushing harder, beating inside her. His ass shot off the mattress. His lips locked with hers. Using his arms to brace him, he pumped his hips, reaching far beyond the folds of comprehensible intimacy.

Still, he couldn't get there.

Minutes passed and he fucked her wild. Her hair whipped around her shoulders like the wind had hold of her and refused to let go.

"Come, Tanner," she pleaded.

"Not yet," he grated out, aware of the sweat pouring from his brow.

The mental barriers were killing him. He moved with her again. This time he stood, latching onto her ass and clutching to her bottom until his hands were numb. He buried his cock inside her. His balls slapped at her ass and he hurt, oh God, how he ached for her. She was right there with him and he still couldn't get enough.

"Tanner, please...." She screamed out and he saw a hint of fear in her eyes.

"Give me a minute, baby," he begged. "Just another minute." Good fucking mercy her body was like heaven on earth and this moment was precious.

The sight of wild eyes made him slow down but he didn't withdraw. He nearly lost his balance then. Moving three steps forward, he pressed her back against the wall and that's when he fucked her like they would never have tomorrow.

His cock moved in and out and up and down. She arched and he took her nipple sucking the little bead until she moaned. As much as he wanted to stay at her breasts, he needed more right then than he'd ever needed before.

"Fuck!" he growled. Right now—right fucking now—he just needed to come!

"Tanner!" She mumbled and cried. "Now, Tanner, please!"

His thighs bunched and her legs wrapped tighter and pow! Holy hell, did he ever explode. His cock pulsed with semen and he pushed his way into the best damn release he'd ever had in his life.

When he finished what must've been the longest fucking experience on the record books, he wilted, and with his arm against her back they fell to the floor and his mouth immediately sought hers. "I'm—I'm sorry," he rasped. "Forgive me, Ally." His forehead met hers. "I don't know what got into me."

"Sorry hell," she said, wide eyed. "That was—"

"The best sex I've ever had," he finished for her.

After the ragged breaths subsided, she finally questioned him, "And now you're going to leave, aren't you?"

"Yeah, Ally. I am."

\* \* \* \*

He carried her back to bed before he jumped in the shower. He left her a stack of cash on the dresser and instructions on where he'd meet her. He had every intention of waking her up but after he had all but abused her body, he just didn't have the heart.

Before he left, he sat down on the edge of the bed and studied her. His eyes traced every inch of her and while he whispered sweet nothings quietly in her ear, he felt confident she was so out of it that she would never hear the first thing he said. In fact, he didn't think too much about spilling everything.

"I've loved you Ally. I've loved you since I was nothing more than a boy walking around with a hard-on and no idea what to do with it. I never took one woman to my bed that I didn't wish she were you instead."

She stirred and he thought he saw a shudder. He grabbed the coverlet and watched her curl into a little ball. Damnation, it was a sin to cover up a body like hers. He folded the sheet at the small of her back, making sure she at least had a warm ass, but

those tits could freeze for all he cared. He wanted to look at her for as long as she'd let him. If she still felt a chill in the air, she could draw the coverlet closer after he left. For now, he wanted to gawk, stare, and store everything to memory.

The buxom blonde had everything. She had personality and looks to match, and God help him, Ally had a body designed for fucking—only, he didn't want to think about it right now. To think about having her again would drive him only harder than the last time. He took a deep breath and studied her, contemplating whether or not she could handle more from him. He could almost feel her riding his cock again.

"Someday, you'll know. Someday Ally, you'll realize why I never wanted you to know the truth. I never changed, baby," he whispered his secrets against her damp flesh. "They did but I didn't." He wanted her to know he was still a good person, at least, better than the monster she seemed to think he'd become but if he told her the whole truth, could she handle it? He didn't think so because then she would see her brothers and her mother in an entirely different light.

He cleared his throat and stroked her belly, right where the tiny little stretch mark existed. The one he put there when he planted his seed and helped them both straight into parenthood. His finger trailed along the line. She squirmed and he withdrew his hand.

"I would never kill a soul. I'm not the murderer you think I am because I would never harm another unless of course, you were in danger and then I would kill and I would die just to save your life." Tears swelled in his eyes and he forced himself to look away from her. "It was just easier for you to believe what you wanted to believe. Then, you didn't have to see all of us for what we allowed ourselves to become."

He rose from the bed then and watched as she draped her arm over her forehead, hiding her face.

Perfect breasts invited him back to bed but she still slept, her heavy breathing proved contentment.

"I love you. I'll send for you in a few days. I promise." He opened the door and slipped out into the hallway leaving behind the one true love of his life.

## Chapter Ten

Ally sat up as soon as the door closed behind him. She'd heard every word of his confession and her heart broke into a zillion little pieces. He wasn't the murderer she'd thought. He wasn't the common thug that he'd portrayed. He was nothing more than the front man, apparently, for her family.

She glared at the stacks of cash spread out across the dresser. She was so used to seeing cash that she knew right off the bat that he'd left her at least thirty grand. She left the bed and moved closer, fully expecting to see a note there. Sure enough, she found one.

Pulling a sheet from the bed, she wrapped the thin material around her and ran to the window overlooking the parking lot of the Hilton. The hotel connected to the airport and Tanner would be headed across the sidewalk to board a plane any minute. A sickening feeling surged through her body and she needed to see him then.

Yanking the curtains out of the way, she scanned the area below. New pavement and concrete ran together and because of the convention the hotel hosted, people were everywhere. Buses blocked her view. She looked to the left and then the right before she saw him. His ridiculous summertime disguise made her laugh outright.

He had on what she referred to as old-man headgear. A rounded top straw hat stood out but the bright yellow Bermuda shirt provided such a blinding effect that she imagined most would look away from him to save their vision, if for no other reason. She laughed out loud and her hand went to the glass.

"I love you, Tanner." She spoke to the window but as if he realized eyes were on him, he stopped midway up the sidewalk and turned around. It was as

if he searched and found the fifth floor window. He tilted the rim of his hat and she imagined he probably shot her a wink too but she couldn't see that far.

She blew a kiss in his direction. And that was pretty much it. He turned around and confidently walked toward the airport terminal. She would see him soon but first, she had a lot to take care of and if she knew Tanner, she had a lot to do in a short period of time.

\* \* \* \*

"Thank you for meeting me." Ally took swift steps toward Special Agent Steve Whitehead. She took a seat at the Atrium bar noticing the peculiar way he nursed his beer with two fingers locked around the mouth of the bottle.

"You look good, Ally." He focused on something across from them, practically on the other side of the hotel lobby.

"We're not alone, are we?" She looked over his shoulder and then back into the eyes of the one man she almost had a relationship with before Tanner claimed her for his own once and for all.

"That depends. Is Dorsey still trailing you or do you have the ability to go outside for a stroll without his crew of goons nearby?" His elbows rested on the bar and his body language was suggestive of a man sitting at the bar drowning his sorrows. Maybe in a sense, he wanted her to believe he was that man.

Ignoring the pun, Ally pressed forward. "What if I told you Dorsey wasn't our guy?"

"*Our guy?*" He turned then to face her and took his time undressing her with his eyes. His gaze stayed at her crotch and at her chest for lingering moments and she could've bet on a low groan leaving his chest.

"Darlin', I think you forgot something here. You gave your notice, or rather you just more or less walked away. What happened, Ally? Did you have a sudden change of heart?" He returned to her chest and smacked his lips. "Damn, Dorsey. He's the luckiest son-of-a-bitch I know."

"Steve, listen to me, please."

"No, you listen to me!" He took her arm and the bartender quickly approached.

"Is there a problem here?"

Ally waved him away. "A lover's disagreement, that's all." She smiled politely and then turned back to him. "Follow me. I'm not doing this here." She stood up and walked through the hotel lobby. He stayed right behind her. They glared at one another when they entered the elevator and the stare wars continued until they walked to her room.

"This is me over here."

Once they entered her room, he stormed across the suite and opened the curtains. He eyed the cash on the dresser. Damn she should've thought to put the money up rather than flaunt that kind of cash.

"You've already sold out to him?"

"I haven't sold out to anyone," she snapped.

"Fernandez seemed to think he was going to make an honest woman out of you." His voice dropped and he added, "I always thought if you settled for anyone, I'd have the opportunity first, not that I wanted to play second string to a drug lord with a reputation for charming the ladies, but you know, I thought we might eventually have a chance."

Ally hated to admit it but at one time, she would've used Steve for the very purpose of filling a void but now, she didn't need him or Fernandez—at least not in the way they both would've liked. "Steve, I am sorry."

"Don't Ally, don't make excuses now. Just tell me why you needed to see me."

"You were still in Knoxville and regardless of how you feel right now, I know I can count on you."

He sat on the edge of the bed. She sat on a chair opposite him. He seemed to torture himself with what ifs and possible scenarios. He glared at the bed and she stared at the wall. He seemed to draw conclusions and she relived memories.

"Tanner Dorsey is our guy. You may have a problem accepting it but I can assure you, I won't stop until I put him away. He'll show his face here again and when he does, I intend to be here waiting and I think you know the same goes for your brothers."

"Tanner's not our killer."

"Maybe not, but he's operating outside the confines of the law and he *is* our man behind the cartel."

"What if he isn't?"

Steve studied her then he looked back at the bed. "You've obviously seen him?"

"I have."

"You've spent time with him?" He was asking for confirmation for something more than time, or so she suspected.

"Yes."

"Here?"

Ally saw little reason to throw salt in the wound so she just simply ignored the last question. "He's not guilty of what you'd like to think."

Steve went to the dresser. "Do you know how this looks?" He rippled through the cash before he set it back down in neat stacks, just the way he found it.

Their gazes met. She'd pay him. Why didn't he just ask her? No one would have to know he was dirty.

"Let me ask you something, Ally."

"Sure."

"Who are you going to hang to save Tanner? Are you willing to sacrifice yourself? See, I've read the files on this unknown and unnamed American cartel and I have a question for you because I think it's one you'd better stop long enough to ask yourself. If Tanner Dorsey isn't our guy, which one of your brothers fits the bill? Hmm? Have you ever thought of that? See if it isn't Dorsey, it's either Darren or David."

The little bomb he dropped was the one she'd waited for because she guessed as much. She was the

only one in the whole damn bureau who evidently failed to put the two together until Tanner's near-silent confession revealed all of their unspoken secrets.

"What if we've been way off since the very beginning? What if..."

Steve yanked her out of the chair and before she could respond, bolts of pure hell-hot anger shot red streaks across his eyes. He shook her. "Ally, I've been here investigating while you've been dashing about the country trying to find yourself or chasing Tanner or locating your girls or whatever the hell it is you've been doing. I know who and what we're dealing with here and I am—without any reservations—going to tell you the facts as I know them." He drew a breath and pushed away from her then. Maybe he couldn't look into her eyes when he slammed down the gavel.

Her lungs threatened to collapse. She waited for him to tell her what she wanted to know and probably needed to hear from a guy like him, one she admired as a professional, trusted as an agent.

"If Tanner Dorsey isn't our guy then that leaves Darren and David and we believe one is just as guilty as the other. In fact, if there's a tainted path leading anywhere, the bloody hands we'll find at the end of it could just as easily belong to David or Darren. That said, my money is still on Dorsey."

"You're wrong." She stood up and marched to the door. So much for trusting the wrong guy.

"I'm right." He strolled across the same path she'd taken and stepped outside of her room, acknowledging an elderly couple strolling down the hall hand in hand. "The sad thing is, Special Agent Ally Stephens knows I'm speaking the truth but the woman inside of the agent will never accept her lover is a killer." He glared at her then as if he didn't see her at all. "My question is for the woman you used to be—how much of your blood is already tainted by those men you like to refer to as your family? No

thanks to Dorsey, I'm betting it's one hundred percent."

Steven frowned. "I think it would be better if we never met like this again. From what I can see, you've already made up your mind and because of what decisions you've reached, I believe we may be standing on the opposite sides of the fence. You don't like it on my side and I'm not stupid enough to cross over to yours. Best of luck, Ally. You're gonna need it."

Before she responded, he turned his back and really, what could she say to stop him?

Her brothers were the cartel. Tanner was the front man. They were all guilty of breaking the law and she would be seen as an accomplice. Perhaps the title fit. She went to extraordinary lengths to find out just what other agents knew about Tanner and her brothers. What would she be willing to do for them once she joined them? Time would tell but in her heart of hearts? She already knew the truth.

## Chapter Eleven

The call came in around two o'clock in the morning. She rolled over and glared at the bedside table before she focused on the digits staring back at her. That's when it hit her. *Tanner*.

She jumped up and retrieved her cell. "Tanner? Tanner is that you?" It had been two weeks and no word. She was going stir crazy without her girls and desperately missed him and her family. Without the FBI to keep her busy, she was bored. Sure, she had a lot of loose ends to tie up but they were all knotted now, she was ready to move the hell on and the sooner, the better.

"Well, well, well. I was told you'd skipped the country but apparently, our Mr. Dorsey didn't see fit to take you with him."

The cool demeanor of Marcel Fernandez came through the phone without any real effort. He was the man she once feared—the one she lured in just so she could work him over while he used her to get closer to her family. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice. Neither would she.

He damn sure didn't call her for phone sex.

"Marcel." She stated his name as she tried to gather her thoughts.

"Honey, you ran off so fast that you missed the main event. I had champagne on ice, steaks to grill, and oh yeah, big plans—*huge plans* for our evening together. I guess Dorsey had better things in store. Of course, on what I make, I guess a guy like me needs to accept the fact that money does the talking to broads who look like you."

"Marcel, let me explain."

"Shut the fuck up, Stephens. I want you back here ASAP. You aren't just going to take off and walk

away from your responsibilities with the FBI. It doesn't work like that and you damn well know it."

"I wrote a letter of resignation. I gave my notice."

"Notice?" He laughed at the hilarity of the implied. "How many hours notice did you give exactly?"

"I don't owe you anything."

"You owe me more than you think and you may owe me more than you'll ever be able to repay if you don't get your ass on the first plane to Miami." Ally stared at the clock and then slammed the phone shut. He could've traced it. Traced it hell, Steve wouldn't feel obligated to protect her now and friendship or not, he was an agent first.

The phone rang right back. "Ally? Ally?"

"Tanner, is that you?"

"Yes, baby, it's me. We can't wait to get you out of there. We have to get you out of there tonight—*right now*. David will meet you in Miami."

"Tanner, I can't—Miami isn't..."

"Listen to me. We don't have another choice. Go to the front desk now. We have a package waiting for you there and instructions for you until you make it to Miami. Once you're there, David will meet you at the gate. If he isn't there, you sit there until he arrives. Wait for him if you have to wait half the day. From there, he'll bring you home to me."

"Miami isn't good."

"Ally, do you love me?"

"Tanner, listen to me."

"*Do you* love me?" He demanded an answer.

"Of course, I do."

"Then you'll love me enough to marry me when you get here. I'll see you on the other side of the sea. Don't keep me waiting."

The phone went dead but she screamed it again and again anyway. "Miami isn't good! Miami will never work!"

Dialing him back wouldn't work and the emergency phone call she made to David when she first left Marcel was a one shot-one call deal. Another emergency number had yet to be established. She looked around her room helplessly before she straightened her back. "Damn it, Pull it together."

She cursed herself. "You're an agent with the FBI." She kicked her luggage and started packing. "Or at least you were—until you decided to jump ship and swim to *the other side*." She cursed again. "I hate you Tanner!"

Tears burned her eyes and as she sat on the bed staring at the wall where he'd ravaged her body and permanently stole her mind and heart, she screamed out again but this time she added the truth as she knew it: "I hate you for making me love you Tanner Dorsey!" And she did, she truly did.

\* \* \* \*

Ally waited at the gate for over three hours. She'd been lost in a good mystery novel and hardly noticed the agents who joined her in the waiting area. She should've recognized one of them instantly but she wasn't sure about the other two but she pegged them for agents. She took a deep breath and stood up.

She didn't know how in the hell she was going to get out of this but she imagined David had already been there and left. Maybe he knew she was being watched or perhaps he thought she was trying to deceive him.

After she gathered her duffle bag and her purse, she headed to the ladies room, at least there she could take a moment to think without being under the watchful eye of federal agents. She couldn't wait to see Tanner and her brothers, she would ream them all a new one for such lame plans. Placing her in this situation bordered despicable. She felt like a true thug.

"Yeah, well get used to it," she muttered, practically unaware she was talking to herself.

Everyone forced her to choose sides and now the agents watching her seemed to think they had it all figured out. They likely dubbed her a criminal and soon, very soon, Marcel would be there. Most likely, he'd already arrived and she almost felt his eyes on the back of her head now.

She entered the crowded bathroom and entered the rear stall. She almost shut the door when a man poorly disguised as an old woman pushed her to the back of it. He quickly covered her mouth as he slammed the door behind her.

"It's me," he told her.

She slowly nodded. He released his hand from her mouth just long enough for her to start a little lip action and release a true blood-curdling scream.

## Epilogue—Unspoken Secrets

Tanner felt like the luckiest man in the world. He had his little girls on either side of him and he stood erect with pride as he waited for Ally. A smile settled on his cheeks and by God, he was a happy man.

Darren nudged him slightly. "You've been waiting for this moment for as long as I can remember."

"Yeah buddy, I have and if you and David hadn't been such pigheaded lugs, I would've heard wedding bells long before now."

He stood a little taller. He eyed the twins who were starting to squirm. The guests rose to their feet and the wedding music began to play.

"Shew, I gotta tell you man, I love the romance in the air." He glanced around at the limited number of guests and nodded at one of his guards giving him the two-thumbs up gesture.

Darren chuckled. "Who the hell are you kidding? The honeymoon is what you're most interested in at this point."

Tanner had to admit, he was looking forward to having Ally back in his arms again. The honeymoon was just part of what he looked forward to but there was so much more too. "I'm just ready for the happily ever after." He nervously shifted his weight and looked across the lawn at the patio doors.

He glanced at Darren and then looked around for the other best man. "Where's David?"

Darren slapped him on the back. "I imagine he's with our sister. Remember, he's giving her away and I'm giving you the final shove. He'll be here."

Tanner nearly doubled over then in pain. The truth hit him with a sharp weapon and an invisible blade. He swallowed hard, trying to focus on the noise coming from the water. Speed boats, that's

what he heard. Several boats racing for shore. "They're not coming."

Darren reassured him. "*They'll be here.* David made it to Miami and met up with her in the ladies room. They ran into a snag or two but I'm telling you, they'll be here. He probably wanted you to have a few wedding jitters."

Tanner shook his head adamantly. "This is the hell I have with Ally. I feel her pain and her anger as much as her happiness and something is off. Something is wrong. She's not coming if they're not here yet."

Darren turned to look down at the docks as a boat damn near banked it as it landed nearby. Tanner's gaze followed his. Another speedboat pulled up at the same time a few helicopters flew overhead.

Everything else happened quickly yet unfolded in slow motion.

"Mama!" Darren turned to find his mother in the small crowd of islanders gathering for the wedding. She seemed to understand. She gripped the chair in front of her and held fast to the metal back, an apparent attempt to steady her wobbly knees when she stood.

Tanner grabbed the girls. One on each side, he hurried them inside. David rushed up from the docks. Tanner could see a machine gun swinging from his side. A few rounds of ammunition were shot across the grounds tearing up the perfectly set stage for a simple island wedding.

Everyone hurried across the patio and made it safely inside. Tanner and Darren rushed about to grab cash and jewels from a nearby wall safe. Glass broke out of the front windows. Gunshots were fired into the home in repetition. David jumped over furniture as he hovered around the girls ushering them out the side door leading to an underground tunnel.

The Stephens boys and their mother, Tanner and his girls and several of the house staff and guards hurried through the hidden passage. When they

reached the end of it, words were not exchanged; they knew what they had to do.

Reluctantly, Tanner handed Molly off to David and she immediately clung to him. He kissed Mrs. Stephens good-bye and buried Holly's fragile little head against his shoulder. He nodded to Darren and the stone was moved out of the way.

Guards stepped out first and prepared to offer protection, in the event they needed it. Rifles were held firmly against solid shoulders and all eyes scanned the open area surrounding them. They hurriedly made their way to the small airplanes awaiting them. "Bermuda," Tanner called out over his shoulder loud enough for David to hear him.

"I'll see you there." He shouted back. Holly and Molly locked eyes but they each clung to the caretaker they wanted most without crying out their understandable anxiety. Molly sucked her thumb. Holly twirled her hair. They each raised a small hand waving at the other one.

"David!" Tanner loaded Holly into the plane with Darren. He screamed across the open field trying to gain his future brother-in-law's attention. "David! What about Ally?"

The man's cold eyes spoke volumes and he wasn't sure he had the capacity to imagine what his expressions meant. They could be translated in so many ways. "She'll find her way back to you, man. She always does." He left him with a forced smile and closed the sliding door to their plane.

Tanner looked at a very frightened Holly. "Momma?" The little girl asked for her mother and he couldn't help but go to her quickly. He held her head against his shoulder and rocked her back and forth. Darren prepared the plane for take-off.

"Your momma will be back with us soon. I promise you." He whispered his words as a meaningful swear to the daughter he and Ally brought into the world together. He made the vow to his little girl as much as to himself because it was then he

realized the solemn truth—he didn't want to live unless Ally was by his side. He didn't think it was remotely possible. A life without Ally was one without purpose. He'd find her again or he'd die trying.

## Part Three

### Unspoken Requests

There are thousands of islands in the Caribbean but only one held the true beauty of the haven Tanner developed specifically with Ally in mind. She realized it from the moment the chopper landed on the back lawn of the expansive estate.

Her eyes set as she scanned the wide sea beyond the picturesque landscape. She quickly covered them with her Fendi shades before the first tear fell. She imagined her daughters there frolicking in the massive lazy river Tanner told her about. Her mother would've sat beyond the pool underneath the shade and watched as Molly and Holly splashed in their massive wading area, complete with a wide waterslide and cascading fountains.

Tanner thought of everything and when he did, he achieved perfection. Why would she think anything else? He never did anything on a small scale. He lived large. Perhaps his grand lifestyle played a part in the list of growing reasons the authorities tagged him as a threat to society.

A large hand added some pressure between her shoulders and guided her forward. "You might as well see what you missed, since we're here." Special Agent Steve Whitehead accompanied Ally to the Caribbean. He'd been very accommodating and she wasn't sure why. The month before everything went to hell, Ally formed the opinion that there would be few opportunities for them to make small talk and exchange any sort of shared information.

Ally was running from the FBI and he was one of them—one of her own—a fellow agent she deserted when she decided to leave her career for the life of a presumed drug lord's wife. She surveyed the grounds

and walked toward the house. She tripped over the evidence of the elaborate wedding she missed. Her high-heel ripped through the remains of an aisle runner and on instinct she looked down at the ground. There, she found two flower girl baskets. The satin and sheer ribbons knotted together and bound the two even as they whirled with a gust of wind.

She bent over and gathered the evidence left behind by her daughters. "Oh my God." She choked back the familiar agonizing feeling. As soon as she saw the evidence of a shoot-out, she rushed inside and the agent emerged. Taking just a high step here or there to step through bay windows or cross over broken panels where large glass patio doors once existed, Ally searched for clues.

She planned to collect any and all evidence, only she wasn't there acting as an agent. She was there as a mother, sister, daughter, and lover. She needed to find her family. In order to do it, she'd have to follow their trail from there.

"Steve, you're sure the girls weren't harmed?"

"I can't offer you a guarantee, Ally, but it looks like they were prepared to move on a moment's notice. We know how they escaped. I can show you."

She nodded her head while continuing to search through the rubble, looking for anything Tanner might have left behind, something to indicate where they'd move next or an added assurance the girls were safe, he was safe, her family made it out without battle wounds or fatalities. The whole place wrecked, she'd have to rummage through a lot of debris before she'd ever begin to pick up the pieces of a past her family hurriedly left behind.

Steve walked around, mesmerized by the palatial surroundings. "It looks like Dorsey believed in taking things to the extreme." He pulled a few weapons from a shattered gun case. He examined a couple of Luger pistols and a European Nitro Express Double Rifle. "I bet he hated leaving these."

She pursed her lips and turned her head. She didn't want Steve to read her expression. Yes, Tanner liked the things money bought him—power and everything that went along with it—and he always pushed for more. Her brothers were no better and her mother was an apparent accomplice. Ally realized her daughters were free to enjoy the pampering indulgences dirty money provided as well as endure the ever-present dangers.

"I'd like to see that tunnel now."

Steve's lips curled in a knowing smile. "I didn't tell you it was a tunnel, Ally. I just said we know how they escaped."

Her gaze held his on a dare. "I'm not stupid. I asked questions. I know there's a passage leading to a clearing." She resisted the urge to tell him there were two of them, in fact. Tanner once told her one tunnel ran the length of the property, perfect for hiding but hardly safe when bombarded by a posse. There was one way in and one way out, whereas the tunnel they apparently used led to choppers always fueled and ready to go. Waiting for the moment when life, as they all enjoyed it, came to an abrupt end.

"It's over here." Steve pulled out two flashlights from a duffel bag he'd toted off the helicopter. He tossed one her way.

He worked to pry loose a mantel and then nudged the plastic hearth. It instantly gave way, leading to a hidden dark space. Steve stepped aside. "I think it's a couple of miles, straight shot. I can go first or you can."

Ally pushed by him. "Try and keep up. We've got a lot of ground to cover before nightfall." Her flashlight in front of her, Ally stepped to the lead and kept a fast pace, never paying too much attention to the cobwebs on the wall or the occasional squeak of a distant critter.

Ally's heart raced and she pressed forward. She thought of Molly and Holly, how her little girls

must've been so frightened as they were carried through the black room.

She wanted to ring Tanner's neck for taking them from her in the first place. She needed to shake David and Darren until her brothers realized what they'd done, what they placed at risk when they chose a life of crime.

"Ally, don't do this right now." Steve stayed on her heels. "I feel you shutting down on me. You can't let your emotions get the best of you right now. If you do, we can't finish here and we have very little time."

"I know." Steve understood her better than most. Perhaps even knew her better than Tanner. They'd worked together for several years, covered one another in drug-busts gone bad. They shadowed one another as the perfect partners and at one time, they were almost lovers. They had dated. They'd messed around. Only, they never consummated the relationship because Tanner was always there. He'd always owned Ally's heart, kept her body bound to him even when he didn't ask for it, even before he claimed it.

Steve stopped. "Hang on."

"What is it?" Ally drew her gun.

"Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"I thought I heard a chopper."

Ally froze where she stood. Her mind played tricks on her and she silently hoped, prayed even, that Tanner was waiting, lurking around outside, anticipating her moves, and coming for her. She stepped up her pace. "I doubt it was anything."

A few minutes passed and Ally called over her shoulder a question she'd needed to ask him for quite a while. "Steve, how did you know? I mean, you were working another case."

He cleared his throat. "I've been working several at one time, because one kept my attention. Surveillance on your brothers and Tanner indicated

they were suspicious of Marcel and not just because he used you to bait them. After they left the states, I found some of the tapes Marcel tried to locate. Seems our friend Fernandez has a lot of skeletons chasing him around. They revealed more than Marcel Fernandez would want anyone to know. Your brothers and Dorsey have him pegged for the true criminal mind he is."

Ally turned around. "What do you mean?"

"You've heard of sleeping with the enemy, haven't you?" Steve carefully asked the question. Ally realized how her relationship looked to everyone in the agency. Most believed she was sleeping with Marcel and planned to marry him. It was all for show.

"You might as well have slipped into the devil's bed chambers. He's dirty, Ally. He's bought and paid for and worse, he's willing to do anything for a dollar—even kill."

"I didn't sleep with Marcel, for the record," the woman responded before the agent. "And what do you mean, *even kill?*"

Steve dropped his flashlight, as if to hesitate. He then took a deep breath and responded. "I didn't dress up like an old bag lady to save you from yourself. When I followed you into the bathroom there in Miami, I was there to keep you alive. Marcel and his thugs put out a shoot-to-kill order on you, your brothers, and Tanner."

Ally turned around and started walking again. This time, she didn't sprint forward. She thought back to the day in Miami. The way she had fled Tennessee in such a hurry, she barely had time to look over her shoulder, even though down deep she'd known Marcel was there, somewhere out there, waiting and watching. She trusted Tanner more than she feared Marcel at her back.

Tanner called her during the wee morning hours that day and told her everything was in order. She was supposed to meet her brother David in Miami.

She protested. He insisted. She followed his orders and led them all into a well laid trap. "Damn it!"

"What?" Alarm in his voice, Steve drew his weapon this time.

"Sorry." Ally took a deep breath and started to turn around and beg for a short break when she caught a glimpse of daylight. "We're here." She pushed through a large wall of rocks.

She took in her surroundings. It was the rounded, brown clearing that tugged her closer. The darker ground in two wide areas suggested a vehicle, or more precisely, a helicopter, or two, occupied the space. The dead grass suggested they'd been there for some time, waiting to be called into active duty.

Steve tossed his sunglasses on and pointed as he spoke. "We think they separated here. Tanner and probably one of the girls headed east while one or both of your brothers headed west with the other little one."

"Did anyone follow them?"

"You mean Marcel?"

Ally shuddered. Marcel Fernandez was a man who commanded attention. He was one of the best the agency had for Internal Affairs and he was lower than a snake's belly. And to think at one time, she thought he might have a soft and gentle side no one else recognized. It was all an act, a game he played with every intention of winning.

"Ally, look at it this way, you never gave—thank God—Marcel what he truly wanted."

"He didn't want me," she snapped, walking closer to the cliffs and peering down at the water.

"The hell he didn't. You were the ultimate prize. For a man like Marcel, it wouldn't have been enough for Dorsey to only think he was sleeping with his woman, he wanted to do it so he held the ultimate of bragging rights. The kind that would drive a man like Dorsey to make a mistake, and by the looks of things here, he was about to make a lot of them."

"Tanner knows I didn't sleep with him."

"I'm guess he does. I'm also sure he would've known the second the clothes hit the floor if anything had happened. His guys were everywhere, watching and listening."

"But not in the house." Ally thought back to Tanner's confession. He told her the day Marcel moved inside her Florida home, he made his goons pull the plug. He moved out for fear of what he'd discover. "Tanner didn't keep a tap on the interior walls of the house after Marcel moved in."

"He told you that?"

"He did."

"And you believe him?"

"Yeah."

Steve shook his head. "Then you're worse off than I thought, Ally. Tanner tightened security when Marcel moved in with you and the girls. It was so bad, if you had a thought, he probably read it. He's one obsessive mother—"

"Stop, Steve," she warned. "I love him and name calling isn't going to change who I am or how I feel about him."

"And who are you, Ally? Sometimes I get a glimpse of the woman you used to be and other times I feel like I'm helping out a stranger." He clasped his hands on her shoulders and firmly squeezed. "It's time I know which Ally I'm working with here because I think it's only fair."

She related, understood. She cared about Steve. At one time, she almost gave in and let herself fall for him. They had a strong connection, a chemistry of sorts, but she refused to let herself fall for another man as a replacement.

"Steve," she began softly, "you know the answer better than anyone."

"I want you to tell me. I have to understand what I'm risking here. Who I'm covering when things get rough, spin out of control, because they're going to and you damned well better prepare for it."

"I'm Tanner Dorsey's woman. I'll always be his girl," she whispered. "No one can or will change that."

"Even now?" Steve asked, setting his jaw and releasing her. "Even though you haven't heard one word from him, not one reassurance that everything is okay with your girls, you still love him?"

"He's my world," she deadpanned.

"Well, Ally I hope you realize what he's done here. He may be your world but he's pulled you into the pits of hell and it's going to take everything I have to keep you from burning in the flames surrounding you."

\* \* \* \*

"Ally?" Steve entered her room cautiously a few hours before midnight. "Are you awake?"

She sat up in bed and flipped on the light. "I'm up."

They'd been on the run for nearly four weeks. It had been eight weeks since she'd heard from Tanner, two months since Steve had followed her into the ladies' room at the Miami International Airport. He'd pushed her into the bathroom stall and she immediately saw another shadow behind him.

She screamed when she saw a gun lowered to his temple. Everything happened so fast then. She witnessed the flash of horror in her brother's eyes when he stepped inside the women's bathroom. He'd walked in on the danger, saw her in Steve's embrace, and then slipped out as if he'd never intended to take her with him.

"It's been too many sleepless nights and too damned long to be on the run. I miss my girls."

"I know." He sat down on the edge of the mattress. "Ally, we're going to have to move again tomorrow. I've heard from my contact. It appears Marcel is taking a leave from the agency so he can devote all of his time to you."

"Well, if I'm not the lucky one. You take leave, he takes leave, who's next?"

Steve chuckled. "You know how to turn an agency inside out. I'll give you that much."

They were in Key West. Rumors and bought informants ascertained her brothers purchased a yacht in the Keys and they were trying to find out if anyone knew where this boat was docked and more importantly, they were in search of a better description of the vessel. Supposedly, it was purchased and then never picked up, which didn't surprise Ally. They didn't care where or how they spent their money. To an outsider looking in, the fires they started sent out a green smoke signal. Cash didn't matter. They had plenty at their disposal.

"You know, it occurred to me that Tanner or David could've bought the boat and never *intended* to pick it up."

"I thought about that too and I also thought of something else. They may have bought that boat for you."

"Me? I don't have a clue how to operate a yacht like the one they purchased."

"Would Tanner risk leaving you instructions or anything on the boat? I mean, is there a possibility he only bought a boat so he could hide cash or documents there?"

"I doubt it, but he might."

"Considering we've been looking for this damned thing for weeks, I'm willing to bet there's a reason behind the purchase." Steve stood up. "Ally, I think we're close but we've been here too long and Marcel will show. He has a full day tomorrow tying up loose ends but then he'll come for us. Either we run or we get ready to face off with him. Your choice."

"You believe he'll come down here?"

"Call it a hunch."

"Then we can count on it." She laughed, realizing his gut feelings—also known as reliable tips—came from a very resourceful contact from the Miami office. She reached over and turned off the lamp.

"I guess tomorrow we'll have to come up with something significant or else we'll leave the Keys empty-handed."

"We'll dig in early. Goodnight, Steve."

"Goodnight." He shut the door behind him and Ally stared at the ceiling, thinking of her daughters and Tanner. She needed Tanner's arms around her more than ever before. "Tanner, wherever you are, please let me know everything will be okay. Let me know you're still around, waiting for me." A lone tear fell and she swiped it away. She wasn't going to be *that* woman. Not tonight. Besides, she *knew* Tanner would wait for her.

Weeping didn't serve a purpose and right now, in a moment of weakness, it only complicated things. She needed the strength of a man and she recognized who was ready to offer her unconditional comfort.

\* \* \* \*

Tanner watched Darren and David chase Molly and Holly down to the docks. He took a deep breath and turned to catch Mrs. Stephens studying his every move. "I didn't see you there."

"You didn't look for me." She smiled. "Ally will love it here, once she arrives. And she will come. You will find her again and I think it will be soon."

"I'd give all of this up right now, if I could take the girls, find Ally and just walk away from this life."

"Tanner, you made a decision as a boy. You can't leave the business now. If you leave, you'll never be able to run. Forget the money. That's not what matters, I agree, but you need the protection this kind of business brings."

"I'm going to die without her."

"Then you're going to have to figure out a way to bring her to us without endangering her or everything we've worked for, Tanner. I'm counting on you to keep my granddaughters safe in the process."

"I know, Momma. I know."

The older woman patted his shoulder before she disappeared between two bronze statues. Molly and

Holly turned and waved as they high-stepped over the sand. "Bye, Daddy!" one of them cried before their uncles hoisted them into a speed boat. From a distance, he wasn't sure who squealed the farewell because he focused on a plane flying over, circling the area with some sort of advertising banner.

Thanks to his chosen profession, nothing went unnoticed—a small sailboat or an aircraft never passed without earning a lingering stare. Some might think he was paranoid. Hell, since he lost Ally, he was borderline insane.

Sometimes late at night, he imagined she was beside him. Fantasies often took him places his body refused to go with another. It had been too long, too many unfulfilled nights without Ally.

He crossed over the threshold and entered the dining room. Taking a seat at the end of the banquet table, he stared at the Jerusalem stone flooring. He pulled out a cell phone he rarely used. It had one phone number programmed, only one man ever answered. His whole body went numb while he contemplated making the call. Did he really want to go there? Did he want to ask for a man's help who had a reputation for destruction? He twirled the phone around in his hand and then placed it against the smooth surface of the table.

"Damn it." He stood up and then sat down again.

"You can't make that call."

His head snapped to attention and he stared at David. The man possessed a sixth sense few men questioned.

"This is my decision."

David's arms were loaded with life jackets, beach towels and sunscreen. He didn't bother setting the bundle on the buffet located behind him. Instead, he only shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I understand where Ally's concerned, you may not want our opinion, but you're going to get it and believe it or not, we're split down the middle. Darren thinks it's necessary and making that call may be the

only way we'll ever see Ally again but I have to think about my sister too, and I'm not just talking about her safety."

"Don't you think I've thought about Ally? She's all I think about."

"Then don't involve Santino." David left as quickly as he entered and Tanner wished he'd never bothered to weigh in with his opinion.

Tanner watched David until he reached the shoreline. He gritted his teeth and then picked up the phone. Slamming it a couple of times, he glared at device and then angrily shoved it away. He narrowed his gaze as the phone slid across the sleek tabletop. The damned thing represented his enemy now and soon, Santino would own the title too, but for now the man was his only hope—his one shot at getting Ally home and in his arms.

## Chapter Two

Ally already understood the importance of time. They were out of it.

Marcel would hit the door at the Miami office later that afternoon and he wouldn't look back. Steve confirmed Marcel knew where they were and in a matter of a few short hours, he'd be on his way to Key West.

The chokehold around their situation tightened because Steve was called back to work on an important case. He had less than forty-eight hours and Ally realized Marcel Fernandez was behind the request. If he was going to pursue her, he wanted her unprotected. Marcel didn't want to go up against two trained agents. He liked the odds a little better, apparently, with Steve out of the way.

"Everything is out of both rooms," Steve informed as he walked out of the small Key West motel.

Ally searched through the outside pockets of her luggage. "Did you happen to see my gold watch?"

"No. Do you think you left it in the room?"

"It's possible. The latch needs repair so it could've slid off my wrist at some point. I'm not sure. Let me run back inside and check."

Steve handed her the room key. "I'll wait here."

After she took the key, Ally hurried to the first floor room located right around the corner from the front office. She unlocked the door and walked inside. Standing in the middle of the room, the best looking man she'd ever seen in her life held her watch out away from his body. A devilish smile tilted his full, thick lips.

"Looking for this, Mrs. Dorsey?"

Ally reached for her gun. Concealed in her belt, hidden well by the navy blazer, she drew it with ease. He never flinched.

"I'm not the enemy. Go get your sidekick and let's chat. We're running short on time."

"Who the hell are you?" Ally kept her gun pointed at his chest. She observed the twitch in her arms. She never shook when she drew her weapon but for some reason, this man made her nervous.

"Tanner sent me."

"I doubt it." She laughed as she considered it. Tanner was far too possessive to use a messenger who looked like the man in front of her.

"I can prove it if you'll lower that piece."

"Not a chance."

"I have to get something out of my pocket."

"Which one?" She stepped closer.

"The right front pocket."

"Pants, I'm sure." Her sarcasm laced through a thick tone. She kept the gun directed toward him and moved to his side.

"Sugar, it's been said I don't have to charm the ladies out of their skirts, I'll find a way to entice them into my pants." His dark black eyes danced with mischief.

She shoved her hand into his front pocket and right before she retrieved an envelope, a stiff jab poked her hand. "What the..."

The hunk in front of her growled. "Sorry, baby. It's a natural reaction. One I can't control, given the obvious."

Ally snarled. "Let me give you some free advice. If Tanner sent you, there's one thing you need to keep in mind: he might use you to carry a message but he wouldn't—"

She let her guard down while she fumbled to open the letter. The gun tilted away from the messenger and it was all the leeway he needed.

Before she realized what happened, the tough guy in front of her turned the tables. With a flick of his wrist, he held her gun and she was pinned against the wall with the crumbled note in her hand, a hard body holding her in place.

"I'm not Dorsey. I'm not your brothers, either. I don't play games with women. I protect them. When the need arises, I fuck them. What I don't do is take orders from them or explain myself. Now, I'm going to release you and *you're* going to go fetch a weasel for me. You know the one. The one who was man enough to run around the country with you for eight weeks or so without so much as laying a hand on you—I think that's his room over there."

He turned his cheek and glanced at the adjoining room. Then he rubbed his lips with the pad of his thumb, undressing her with his eyes. "What a dumb fucker he is." He slapped her on the butt and then released her. "We're running out of time. Read your love letter on the way. I'll wait five minutes, that's it. I'm your only shot at seeing those prissy little girls or Dorsey again. I suggest you move that sweet ass of yours *right now*."

Ally gulped. He touched her ass! She glared at him for a second, hoping he sensed her displeasure. God, she was pissed. She didn't take orders from men, or at least she tried to avoid it. Tanner and her brothers were the exceptions. She found herself at Tanner's mercy more often than not. Now, this bear in front of her expected the same. She didn't think so. She narrowed her gaze and felt a quirk in her jaw. Before she thought of the consequences she drew her arm back and clenched her fist.

As quickly as she propelled a limb forward he slammed against her. This time he pinned her against the bed. Her breasts heaving against his chest, he peered down at her with a grimacing stare. "I'd love to do this all day but I'm afraid we're out of time."

A knock interrupted their professional foreplay.

"Ally, are you in there?"

"Answer him," he told her.

"Yeah, I'm coming."

Biting his lower lip, the man snickered "No, not yet you're not, but by damn, you will be by the time I

get through with you." He rolled off the bed and drew a gun out of the back of his pleated pants.

"You've got some nerve!"

"Answer the fucking door and read your honey's words of wisdom. Maybe then you'll see I didn't come all the way down here to roll around on a bed with a woman I don't know."

Ally's fury wasn't in check but she forced herself to rein it in before she answered the door. Steve stormed inside, pale as a sheet. "I thought I heard voices in here."

"Sit down." The tall, dark, and handsome stranger used a tone that suggested he wasn't in the mood to ask twice.

"Ally?"

"I have no idea who he is." She clutched the letter.

"You can call me anything you like. I'd never give you my real name so just make up one and go with it for the time being." Keeping his weapon aimed at Steve, he said, "Now, Ally, read the letter so we can get out of here."

Nervously, she complied by ripping back the sealed flap and tugging free the note inside. She immediately recognized the cologne. He'd sprayed the letter with a shot of Polo, the only fragrance she ever remembered Tanner wearing. What a dork. To be such a tough guy, sometimes he did the dumbest things. She recognized the sloppy slant of his handwriting too:

*Dear Ally, I miss you. The girls miss you. We're all safe and waiting for you. It may take some time, but Santino will bring you home to us. I trust him. Well, on most things.* She could almost hear Tanner's nervous chuckle because from what she'd witnessed from Mr. Santino so far, she imagined he had reason to worry. She glanced up at the wicked stranger and then back at the letter again. *You'll need to say your goodbyes to your partner. Trust me, at this point, I'd like to think he'd join you for this journey until we*

*meet again but it's better to lose the baggage now. With any luck, he can throw Fernandez off your path. Santino will take you to the boat. I think you know which one. I hear you've been asking questions. Once you get there, you'll find enough cash in two of the safes to live comfortably.. It will take some time to shake the tails. We can't afford mistakes this time. Trust me. Trust Santino—and Ally, no one else. I love you.*

*Come home to me.*

*Tanner*

Ally turned to face the wall as if she expected to find a respirator there or something. Right now, breathing was a complete task. "Damn him!" She kicked the wall and the stranger, apparently the one Tanner referred to as Santino, chuckled.

"Temper, eh?" he asked Steve but he didn't get a reply. "I guess Dorsey didn't have a lot to offer outside of a few orders."

Ally stormed to the other side of the room. Her fists clenched at her sides. "Listen you arrogant son-of-a—"

"Watch it, woman. I'm not Dorsey and I'm not in love with you, which means I dish it, but I don't take it. Got it?"

"What if I refuse to go with you?" She crossed her arms over her chest. "I bet I'd cost you a pretty penny, huh?" If Ally knew anything at all, she realized Tanner didn't hire amateurs and if he paid this man to bring her in, the real profit he'd earn was on the back end, not the front. The man wouldn't realize a huge payday unless he delivered the goods—her.

Santino marched forward. Steve stepped in front of him. Santino didn't look his way but he stopped him with a gun to his chest. Addressing Ally, he said, "I didn't come down here to go back without the package. You won't cost me a pretty penny because,

darlin', I'm after the crisp sound of hundred dollar bills. That means I'll tie you up, gag you if I have to, but you will follow my instructions. I'm your only ticket to Tanner and to those little girls that cry themselves to sleep, asking for their momma every night. Got it?"

He played a card Ally hadn't seen on the table and she doubled over as if he'd punched her in the gut with the news. "I'll go."

"Then kiss loverboy adios because we've gotta roll now."

"Ally?" Steve waited for a confirmation. Ally always left Steve behind and since he'd already accepted the fact he had to return to the agency, he probably didn't mind so much this time. Only their separation was earlier than expected and instead of Steve making the plans, securing arrangements, they were forced to trust a stranger.

"Give us a minute." She didn't ask. She just told the six-foot-four tank that she wanted a few moments alone, realizing from the start, privacy wouldn't be granted.

"Can't do it." He shook his head. "If you owe him a smooch good-bye or something, I can close my eyes but outside of that, can't say that I have immediate plans to leave you alone with anyone."

"Great." She grumbled before she snatched Steve's arm and pulled him into a tight hug.

"Ally, you're sure this is okay?"

"I'm sure. It's what Tanner wants."

"Well, God help us all if he made a mistake sending this man for you."

"You know him?" Ally questioned.

"No." Steve looked at him out of the corner of his eye, the same way he might glance into a garbage bin, with pure distaste. "I know men like him."

"Ah, now, tender sentiments aren't expected for the send-off." Santino blew him a kiss from the door and then winked. Pulling out a phone from his

pocket, he pressed a few numbers and waited. "She's in my arms, on her way to yours."

"Wait! I want to—"

Before it registered what he was doing, Santino stepped into the bathroom and tossed the small phone into the toilet. "Soon."

She felt like she was leaving with the executioner or something. Santino was cold, dark, and disconnected, something that truly frightened Ally because she'd profiled guys like Santino. They were hard nuts to crack even if they didn't have a criminal record and men like the one in front of her typically possessed one somewhere. In fact, they generally had a few of them in several different languages.

Steve winked at Ally. "I guess this is good-bye."

Ally fought back tears by reminding herself that they'd said their farewells many times before. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling. This was really it. "Steve..."

"No, Ally. Not now. It wasn't our time and that's just the way it is."

"Thank you for everything you did for me."

"Ah shit, I almost forgot." Santino reached into his pocket and drew out a cashier's check. "Since it's obvious you didn't sink your dream wand into her, Tanner said to give you this." He handed Steve the check and then placed his hand on the small of Ally's back. "No one can trace it and if they do, they'll discover you had an aunt who passed away back in Kansas. She left you her life savings."

Taking a deep breath, he blinked a couple of times. "I can't take this money."

Ally squeezed his arm. "Steve, yes you can. You never know what tomorrow holds and you never know when you might need a little cushion."

His lips thinned before he barked at her. "I'm not like you, Ally, I can't be bought."

"I'm going to let that slide. You know that's not true. I wasn't bought, but in a sense I was always

paid for. They're my family, Steve. My brothers, my mother, Tanner, and the girls...they're my family."

"Well ain't that just downright sweet? Now, say adios, chica. Let's roll."

Steve took a weighted breath and folded the check over. "Take care, Agent Stephens."

"You too," she said, kissing his cheek and waving her final goodbye.

"I tried to be patient and understanding back there," Santino grated out. "From now on, when I say, 'let's move', we move. Got it?"

"Yes sir," she grumbled sarcastically. She followed Santino outside to retrieve her belongings, realizing then that everything familiar was now in her luggage and everything she loved was in the hands of the man walking in front of her.

## Chapter Three

"He has her." Tanner stood up and greeted David and Darren when they entered the narrow library. David glared beyond where Tanner stood, taking time to notice a canoe in the distance.

"He can't bring her in yet, Tanner." Darren walked over to the wet bar. "David? Did you tell him?"

"No." David didn't look at Tanner and that alone told him something loomed, a new danger lurked.

"Seems the Colombians didn't take too kindly to the trip you took with Ally. Marcel's fellows paid some of our contacts a visit and now they're interested in finding one Special Agent Ally Stephens."

Tanner glared at the brothers. "What the hell are you talking about?"

We told you it would backfire but you wouldn't listen. We warned you not to involve her on any level. You were too headstrong to think with the right head. Now it seems, there's a price on Ally's."

Tanner picked up a nearby crystal water pitcher and threw it against the wall. It shattered in hundreds of pieces. "That's absurd! I took her there. She didn't ask to go."

Several months had passed since Tanner's bad judgment call. He took her into the poppy fields of his trade and convinced her that he was the monster she'd profiled. The drug lord everyone feared. How in the hell could *this* have happened from *that*?

"You took a *federal agent* into the throes of illegal activity." Darren moved closer. "What the bloody hell were you thinking? You knew the risks. You had to realize they'd find out sooner or later who she is and what she means to you."

"Marcel Fernandez is a dead man." Tanner was furious. He couldn't think. He couldn't feel. He no longer saw the men in front of him. He had to get out of there. The walls were closing in on him. Soon all those books stacked from floor to the ceiling would be used for throwing practice; a way to release one hell of a temper tantrum.

"I told you both a long time ago. We should've brought Ally in and informed her. She was close enough to do the job. She could've gotten rid of Marcel for us," Darren pointed out, probably believing that nonsense.

"Hell! She wasn't going to kill him. For crying out loud, the man pretended to be her friend when we all deserted her. The last thing we wanted to do was put her in danger by letting her know too much and there's no way we could've left her to do the dirty work we should've done years ago." David over-extended himself. Those few words were all he planned on saying. It was obvious when he set the bottle of scotch in front of him and began tossing back one glass after another. He consumed nearly half the bottle before anyone said anything else.

Finally, Tanner asked the painful question. "What's the price?"

"Three million and rising," Darren informed him of the clearance tag on his sister's head. "You're going to have dollar signs attached to you, too, if you're not careful. From what we can tell, the Colombians believe they'll get to you by getting rid of her. They hate to take you out because, of course, getting rid of you will affect their bottom line in the end. Damn it, what were you thinking!"

"It's easy to point an accusing finger here, isn't it, Darren?" Tanner accused, cursing his own ignorance every step of the way. What *was* he thinking?

David grumbled.

"I'm not pointing fingers, Tanner. Hell, I even understand what you were trying to do but you

should've thought about the consequences, the danger. It's not like you took her into a flower garden and asked her which roses she wanted in her own backyard. Hell, you took her into the middle of our trade, into a known war zone among drug lords."

David stood up and walked over to the far wall. He chose a book. The first one he touched. He didn't look at it. "Santino has Ally?"

"Yeah. The call came in earlier."

Darren shook his head. "Then I guess he'll sure as hell get to know her. You might as well tell him to take her on a little road trip or something. He can't bring her here until we get this thing with the Colombians taken care of, do you understand?"

"I understand. Hell, I wouldn't put her life at risk."

"That's debatable, given her present company and your past decisions." David shook his head and left the room.

\* \* \* \*

"I hope you're a damned good actress," Santino said, giving her another intimidating visual sweep before they exited the cab. "Flinch and we're followed. Act repulsed by me, and we're followed. Act suspicious in any way and—"

"I got it. We're followed." Ally shifted in her seat. They approached the small marina and Ally soon saw her future unfold. Great, just terrific, she mused. She and Mr. Personality would be using Tanner's yacht. "I won't risk blowing our cover."

Santino pulled out his wallet and handed the driver some bills. "Stop here."

The car came to an abrupt halt on a side road. The cabbie jumped from behind the wheel and helped Ally with her luggage. She thanked him and pushed a twenty dollar bill in his palm, assuming a man like Santino wouldn't tip appropriately.

"I tipped him fifty. How much did you give him?"

"Only twenty."

"A seventy dollar tip? Shit. Next time, I'll leave it up to you. Fifty was plenty of hush money."

"Actually, we both screwed up. That guy will remember a seventy-dollar tip."

Santino mumbled something and followed her. "Well, Miss Award-Winning Agent, tell me something, if you always think so great on your feet, what kept you from doing the same on your back? How'd you end up in bed with a drug lord?"

An array of emotions lashed at her heart all at one time. Her body tingled when she thought of the first time she'd made love to Tanner. Then, in an instant, she felt a swift kick in the gut. Tanner wasn't a drug lord. One or both of her brothers owned that title, perhaps, but not the man she loved. She glanced at the boat slips, choosing to ignore the questioning eyes staring back at her.

"Does this kayak have a name?" she asked, changing the subject.

"You're not going to tell me Tanner's secrets, huh?" He laughed. "Can't say that I blame you. I damn sure don't blame Dorsey. A woman like you," he paused, licked his lip and finished when he said, "is bound to go crazy in the right man's bed."

She stopped walking and pointed an accusing finger at him, shaking it in pure anger. "No one, and I mean no one..."

Before she finished scolding him, or really before she even had the chance to get started, Santino pulled her closer and sucked her forefinger in between his lips in a delicious display of a lover's quarrel immediately resolved. His sunglasses fell further down the bridge of his nose and he rolled his eyes to indicate someone stood close enough to witness.

"Ah, Mr. Sanchez?" A short man in a solid white suit nearly ran over his own feet in an effort to be the first man to kiss *Mr. Sanchez's* sorry ass.

Santino pulled Ally closer and then patted her bottom before he released her. The smug expression

covered his face for a brief second before he turned with his right hand extended. "Mr. Bolzro." Santino's accent held true to the thick Spanish implication.

In times like these, Ally wished Tanner was around so she could truly beat the ever lovin' hell out of him. It hurt her pride and her feelings that he wasn't around so she could try it a few times. Who did he think he was? He sent an arrogant man like Santino to manhandle her and he was where? On a remote island somewhere, probably with a half a dozen busty blondes fanning him with feathers or something and she was stuck with a groper, a menacing man with a bad attitude.

Santino pushed Ally away, dismissing her like a man would shake off his mistress. He focused on the man in front of him. "I understand you have everything in order for us?"

"Yes, I do. If you'd like to handle business, you can allow your...woman to..."

"My wife," Santino corrected him and then dismissed her again. "Darling, there's our yacht. Go wait on board. Let me finish filling out this paperwork and then I'll join you."

Ally nodded and started walking toward the boat—actually it looked more like a ship. She glanced over her shoulder once and caught Santino staring at her ass. He removed his glasses and shot her a wink.

The fucking nerve of that man! She pulled the finger he recently sucked through her closed hand. The damn thing burned where his lips had been.

She refocused her attention on the boat slips. Their vessel was an eyesore for the marina and Key West wasn't short on luxurious yachts. Rolling her luggage up the ramp, she stepped on a plank and tugged her belongings on board, where she was immediately greeted by the awaiting crew.

Ten men and women lined up to take her things and welcome her. Ally allowed them to take her bags and then walked around to the front deck. In a matter of minutes, Santino joined her.

She looked over his right shoulder. "That was quick."

"Yes, doesn't take long for these transactions when you're buying a boat that's already paid for and reverting back to the original owner."

"So this is your yacht?"

"Technically, it is now. However, I'm told your brothers are fond of her and they plan to take her off my hands once I return their sister to them in one piece."

"I see." She felt her lips curve into a smile in spite of herself. "So is there any reason I should be worried about arriving in one piece or are you good at your job?"

Santino shot her a sideways glance before he made his way to the bar. "With an ass like yours, your brothers and Dorsey will be lucky if they ever lay eyes on you again." He snickered and then added, "And yeah, baby, I'm damned good. Most women tell me I'm the best they've ever had."

"That's it." Ally slammed her palm down against the railing. "I've heard just about all the come-ons I intend to listen to on this voyage."

"Uh-huh," Santino muttered, taking a sip of his liquor. He peered over the glass when one of the crew members approached on deck.

"We're ready when you are," the young man said with a friendly smile.

"No time like the present. I'll show the lovely *Mrs. Sanchez* around. Let me know if you need me." With a wave of a hand, he dismissed the crew member.

Turning back to Ally, he licked his lower lip in a most suggestive way. "I imagine you can't wait to find out where we'll be sleeping."

"I am not, let me remind you of this only once, I am not sleeping in the same bed with you."

"Good, I'd hoped you say those very words. I'm going to enjoy this more than I thought."

\* \* \* \*

"Tanner will kill you for this." She glared at the ceiling as she wiggled against the handcuffs binding her to the four-poster bed. When Santino showed her the master stateroom earlier that afternoon, she'd never imagined this. She felt confident he might lock her in the room with him, but come on—shackle her to the bedpost? The man had some serious attachment issues or something. *Yeah, or something.* "Let me go and I won't tell him about this. Otherwise, it's your head."

"Oh, I don't know. Some would tend to argue the motives of a man who sends me, of all people, after their woman. I'd say it's safe to assume Tanner doesn't care what I do with you as long as I return you to him safe and sound." He slowly undressed and stood in his boxers long enough for Ally to note the obvious. The man's erection pushed through his shorts and thank goodness for very large favors. His boxers weren't those wicked shorts with the automatic trap door. A lone button, maybe two, kept him from showing pure, hot flesh.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't think Tanner would want you sleeping in my bed."

"Darlin', that's exactly where he knows I'll be until we meet up with him. Tonight, you can sleep in those frilly little cuffs. Tomorrow night, perhaps you'll decide it's in your best interest to accept the things you don't stand a chance of changing. And who knows, by day after tomorrow, you might even reach over here with that soft little hand of yours and stroke me into a bedtime fantasy."

"Yeah, keep telling yourself that *Mr. Sanchez*. In fact, do one better than that, wrap that arrogant self-serving hand around it yourself and dream the fuck on!" Ally glared at him before she yanked the cuff again. "This is uncomfortable as hell! For the record, if I don't sleep, you don't sleep!" She kicked her feet a couple of times.

Leaning on his elbow, he watched her. "Ally, it might serve you well to get along with me. Like I told

you before, I'm not Dorsey, and you won't find me agreeable when I don't get my way, or my rest."

"Tanner would never approve of someone tying me down like this. You don't have to remind me you're not Tanner. Hell no! I realized it long before you chained me to this bed. You are nothing like him!"

"I bet you wish I was Dorsey about right now, don't you?" he rasped, pointing toward the ceiling. "With all the mirrors in this stateroom, dear God, what you could see and do with the right partner makes for some wicked thoughts." It was a challenge and Ally recognized it as such.

"What do I have to do to convince you to take the cuffs off?"

"Hmmm..." He dragged his forefinger up and down her arm. "Sleep naked."

"Forget it." She closed her eyes again and pursed her lips. "Get the light."

"Your choice." He leaned over her and twisted the little knob on the lamp.

"Bastard!"

"Goodnight, have sweet dreams, Mrs. Sanchez." The moonlight allowed her to see him hovering right over her. He was close enough to kiss her, close enough to die, too, if Tanner happened to slip on board in the middle of the night.

"Can you at least call me Ally behind closed doors?"

"Darlin', I'm going to call you all sorts of things when I'm lying here next to you—Ally, lover, kitten, baby, darlin', muffin, sweet cheeks, my warm little puddin' pie..."

"That's enough."

"Ah, but I'm just getting started." Santino rolled over on his side and faced the wall. "You'll see. I have a way with women, as you already know. Like I told you when I met you, I won't have to ask you to drop your skirt—you'll be begging to get what's in my pants. I'd even lay down odds on it. I'm sure Tanner

has and if I know Dorsey, he's betting this is one sure thing."

\* \* \* \*

Santino woke up around three in the morning. He rolled over and watched the rise and fall of Ally's chest. The natural light from the full moon allowed for too much temptation. She slept like he imagined she lived—cautiously. She flinched when he moved ever so slightly and even in her sleep, she tugged at the cuff binding her to the bed, to one uncomfortable position. For three hours, she'd slept in the same provocative pose. She looked like a woman in waiting and the thought provoked twitching from his prick.

He groaned and reached over to the nightstand. Retrieving the keys from his pants, he felt the perverted smile tugging at his lips. He fought back a guttural growl as he remembered her hand sliding into his slacks earlier. So what if she only visited there to retrieve a note from her lover. She had her hand in his pants long enough to feel what he offered a woman. He made damned sure of it too.

Rolling over to the other side, he unlocked the cuff and pulled her wrist free from the fur-covered restraint. If only he had the opportunity—just one time would surely be enough—to have her clinging to those pretty restraints, begging for pleasure, arching for him in a moment of pure need. What he'd give for opportunity, what he'd pay in gold.

"What are you doing?" she asked, an accusing tone in her voice.

He held out the furry contraption to show her. "You were uncomfortable and whining in your sleep. I thought I'd try a concept we're both unfamiliar with—trust."

"I don't whine."

"You were whining. Actually, whimpering is more appropriate." It was the whimpering that made his cock hard. A desperate cry from a woman suffering through her dreams in a wanton heat so profound that he swore he smelled a hint of her arousal.

"Thank you for releasing the cuff. It was stupid in the first place."

"I wanted you to remember who is in control here, Ally. Never forget it. I am here for the job. Like it or hate it, I don't care, but one thing you will do is accept my rules and play by them." He tugged the sheet around him and crooked his arm behind his neck. "Get some sleep. Tomorrow, we plan."

"For what?"

"For the trouble ahead."

## Chapter Four

Santino slept a few more hours and finally gave it up as a wasted effort around five o'clock. To jump start his day, he headed to the galley kitchen with a purpose. He focused on one of the more important tasks at hand—coffee.

He gave a few short orders to the early crew and then walked out on deck to watch the sunrise. Sipping his coffee, he allowed his imagination to run wild. From the corner of his eye, he noticed the hot tub. Steam rose in wild rings of an inviting fog.

He blinked as his mind's eye tried to tease him into a rare state of confusion. For a second, he swore he saw Ally's strawberry blonde hair cascading over the side of the small pool. His breath caught in his lungs and he turned his attention back to the dark sea. The petite woman had a body built for fucking. Damn Tanner for putting him here with a woman like her.

Santino glanced around the waxed decks. Elaborately furnished on the inside and on the outside, Ally would find the yacht comfortable enough. Santino promised Tanner he would offer her the chance to visit the occasional ports of call. If it killed him, he was supposed to remain pleasant, but distant.

Oh yeah, Dorsey knew his woman better than she even understood herself. He realized what was at risk when he hired him. From what Santino discovered on his own, the man had few other options. The price to kill was high and without his help, the lovely Ms. Ally stared death in the eye. One blink and she would die.

He started to feel the insistent reminder of how easily he responded to Ally. His erection pressed against his jogging pants and he tried to focus on

thoughts that didn't give a man a sudden rise. He thought about weapons.

He meant to ask Ally what she was packing and forgot. If he didn't get it together, he would likely forget several details. Thinking about the little firecracker who'd shared his bed all night long made his dick ache, regardless of how much he tried to deny it, the woman had worked him over without ever meaning to do the job. He didn't want to think about Ally right now. He wanted to concentrate on what they faced in the near future. He reminded himself she was the job.

Ally would sleep in his bed for the next few days. The job paid a lifetime salary and he was expected to protect and guard her even if it meant shielding her with his own body. Yet, he'd been given an unspoken request. Dorsey trusted him with his woman and a man like Tanner Dorsey was protective of his family, his little sex kitten. Why he dared to think about her in the more carnal sense only left him questioning himself and his motives.

He made the mistake of verbally answering his inner question. "Because all I can think about is her voluptuous little body and that's not part of the job description. Why doesn't Dorsey have foul taste in women?"

Ally strolled past him as if she hadn't heard the confession. Gripping a mug in her right hand, she held onto the white railing that surrounded the deck, swinging almost to face him, her pantsuit crinkled in all the right places, thanks to the fact she slept in it.

"You missed a beautiful sunrise."

"Apparently, I missed one hell of a night, too."

"Meaning?"

"I heard what you said."

"About?" If she was going to call him on it, then she might as well follow through.

"You know what I heard."

"I don't, Ally. I say a lot of things when I'm sitting alone in deep thought and normally, I don't

have to worry about someone sneaking up on me and interrupting those thoughts."

"Don't you mean fantasies?"

"Careful." He stood up and started back into the open area of the salon.

"I think it's only fair to tell you that I am in love with Tanner."

"I never thought anything else. He's obviously going to a lot of trouble, sparing no expense, to get you back where he wants you."

"I overheard the comment about my body. Did you do something I should know about while I slept?"

"Darlin', if I'd done something to that sinful body of yours, I promise there'd be no room for question. You wouldn't have to ask. You'd remember every slurp and sip, each stroke and thrust."

The woman looked like she was truly going to pass out from lust. Ah yeah, he understood exactly what Ally needed. Giving her a glimpse into what she was missing without a man in her life right then served as a blissful reminder. The second he mentioned insinuated acts of oral sex, he watched a flicker of desire sparkle in her eyes.

She cleared her throat and then sipped the gourmet coffee. "What plans do we have?"

"No plans."

"Where are we headed?"

"Waiting on your lover to call, and once he does, I'll have news for you."

"Can I talk to him?"

"Sure," he grumbled. "I don't see why not. Just keep in mind, while we expect these phones to remain secure, we don't want to press our luck. You'll have a few minutes, max."

She yawned. "It's going to be a beautiful day. If we don't have plans to dock anywhere, I guess I'll make the most of it and work on my tan."

Santino started inside again, this time he called over his shoulder, "I hope to hell you hate tan lines."

\* \* \* \*

Ally unzipped her suitcase and tugged her clothing free, tossing items this way or that while searching for a more modest swimsuit. Her trunk-sized suitcase was overloaded and the duffel bag primarily held her weapons and a couple of changes of clothes. After a few seconds of trying to feel around for something that resembled her bathing suit, she took a deep breath and decided she'd just unpack.

Santino entered the master stateroom about the same time. "I forgot to tell you. Dorsey sent all kinds of designer outfits and casual wear to the yacht before we left. It's in the walk-in closet." He pointed and then chuckled. "I'm not all that turned on by his swimsuit selections but hey, I'm only the hired help."

Ally narrowed her gaze then and let the comment slide. "Don't you mean hired gun?"

"Same thing, I guess."

Ally pushed herself up from the floor and swiped her hands against one another before dusting off her backside. "No, it's not the same, is it?"

"I like to think of myself as a protector."

"A protector?"

"Yes." He sat down on the sofa and kicked his feet onto an ottoman in the middle of the sitting area. Grabbing an atlas, he studied the world map, focusing on the Caribbean.

"I think you're a killer." Ally didn't know why she wanted to provoke him but for some reason, since his confession poolside left her with too many forbidden thoughts, she wanted to remain on professional terms and never wanted to let her guard down. If she kept his profession in mind, then it would be easy to remember why they were there, what common goals they shared and how they planned to achieve them.

Pursing his lips, he took a deep breath. His nostrils flared and he stood up. After a stretch, his lips curved in a meaningful smile. His limbs fell from above his head to hang at his side. In a flash, he grabbed her and she crashed against his chest.

"Now then. That's better, isn't it?"

She swallowed stiffly.

"You wanted my attention. You've got it." He licked his lips and pressed his lower half against her.

So help her, she was going to kill Tanner when she got her hands around his neck, never mind his cock. Right now, all she could think about was the latter since Santino did everything to ensure she noticed his.

"I didn't want you to notice me," she grated out.

"Oh, I think you did."

"You need to let me go."

"You should've thought of that before you teased me this morning."

"I didn't try to tease you."

"Ah, but you did."

"If I picked an argument with you, then I apologize but let me assure you of one thing, I don't use those tactics for some sort of foreplay."

"You don't?" He rubbed against her again.

"No, and please keep your...your thing...away from my...."

He pressed again. "Ah, you want me to keep my dick in my pants because you're terrified of what you'll do if I don't, huh? It's okay Ally, I'm not going to tell Tanner how hot and bothered I make you."

She wiggled and squirmed but his grip only tightened. "Let go of me."

"You think I don't feel that hot heat rubbing against my cock." His thighs bunched as he slid up and forward, caressing harder, faster.

"Stop it!"

"Ally, let me ask you something. If I'm a killer, a hired-gun, then what do you think your chances are of running any kind of game on me? If I'm so horrible that the worst of our breed hires me to bring you in for him, what do you think I'm capable of doing to a woman I want in my bed?"

She didn't answer.

"That's what I want you to think about. Before you piss me off, you stop and think about it." He released her then and returned to the sofa, taking the time to study her. "And Ally?"

"What?" she snapped as she walked into the closet.

"You think about it *long and hard*, sugar."

\* \* \* \*

Ally stepped out of the closet in a white one-piece swimsuit. She didn't bother with a cover-up because the swimsuit wasn't provocative and she had a beach towel draped over her arm. "Are you hungry? I can whip up some breakfast, if you'd like."

"We have a full time staff to prepare meals. What would you like?"

"I'll have something simple, whatever you're having is fine." Ally decided, when she entered the closet, she was going to get along with Santino, even if it meant putting up with the occasional seductive remarks. They were going to spend a few days together and she wanted those to pass quickly. If they were going to pass at all, she needed to get along with her protector and he was right, she didn't need to piss him off. The last thing she wanted was a guardian looking for a little angry sex.

Leaning over the bed, she searched through her purse. She immediately felt his hot gaze glued to her ass. The attention seared her skin. He practically branded her with his glare. She immediately straightened up and pulled her sunglasses from the side pocket. A cell phone buzzed loudly in her hand.

"What the fuck?" Santino ran over and grabbed the phone. "What are you doing with this?"

"I forgot about it!"

It buzzed again.

"Damn it!" He stared at the caller ID. It didn't register. "Answer it on speakerphone." He shoved it back into her hand. "Walk slowly to the top deck for a better signal and reception."

Ally took a deep breath. "I don't think it's a good idea." She started walking anyway.

"You're not paid to think right now. I am. Answer it."

She didn't question him again. His ruthless tone suggested it wasn't up for debate. "Ally Stephens."

"Well, well, well. Ally Stephens. Are you sure it isn't Sanchez? After all, I hear you and your husband, Dorsey, no doubt, took an overdue honeymoon."

Santino pressed his forefinger to his lips.

"Marcel."

"Ally, how are you, lover?"

"What do you want, Marcel?"

"I wanted you. Apparently, everyone else does too." His thick tongue slurred with underlying accusations. "Maybe everyone gets a piece of you when you're on the run, huh?" It was the only clue he gave. He didn't really think she was with Tanner.

Santino indicated he wanted her to ask what he meant by the statement by rolling his hands forward like he was kneading dough. He wanted more info. Marcel wasn't dumb. He'd only supply what he wanted them to have.

"What do you mean, everyone else does too? I'm nothing special. I'm just a woman in love with a man. I want to be left alone."

"Left alone? Darling, you should've thought of that while you were living with me. I left you alone, didn't I? Took real good care of you and the girls too, didn't I?"

Santino nodded his head.

"Yes, you did." She shook her head and held her palms upward to indicate she didn't know where he was going with all this.

"Ally, I wanted to be the first to tell you that the Colombian cartel upped the offer."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh...." Sarcasm oozed from Marcel's voice.

"Dorsey didn't tell ya, did he?"

"Tell me what?"

"There's a bounty on your head, honey. A power-hungry drug lord has it out for you. Four million dollars and rising and since it's going up daily, you can only imagine what I'm thinking, can't you, Ally?"

She swallowed stiffly. "You're lying."

"We'll see soon enough. I'm not even a day behind you now, Ally. It's only a matter of time before I take what's mine and then hand you over for everyone else to do the same."

"Cut the call," Santino whispered.

She hit the end button and stared straight ahead. "You knew this?"

"No, I didn't."

"Of course you did. It's why Tanner sent you instead of coming for me himself." She clutched her towel and the phone as she marched across the deck.

"How the hell would I know about some damned drug lord placing a price on your pretty little head?"

"Oh, jeez, I don't know. Could it be because you work for one of them?" Ally snapped, forgetting her place, her position, her inner decision to call a truce with the man in front of her. "Maybe it's because the man who hired you only hired a killer because he had to have someone of your caliber to clean up his damned mess!"

"Ah, so Tanner has dirty hands too, eh? Careful, Ally, remember where your loyalty lies. I may know a lot about Dorsey but anger is never good when it provokes a mouth to talk too much."

Ally flopped down on a lounge and took a deep breath. In all of her years with the agency, she couldn't recall a time when a price had been placed on her head. Now she had one and she had a supervisor with Internal Affairs ready to help pump up the going rate.

A low rumble in the pit of her gut reminded her of Marcel's vile nature. "He'll come for me and once he has me, he'll hang onto me until he can negotiate the right price. Then, he'll hand me over to the Colombians."

Santino didn't look worried. "Give me the phone."

"No."

"Give me the damned phone!"

Ally slapped it against his stomach and he immediately tossed it overboard. "We're going to have to make some decisions. Let me get in touch with Dorsey and find out what's going on."

"You really didn't know about the Colombians?"

"No. In all honesty, I wouldn't have taken the job if I'd known."

\* \* \* \*

Tanner glared at the fax. "Four million dollars. Are they fucking out of their minds?"

Darren walked into the elaborate living room and kicked a Barbie doll out of his way. "The girls shouldn't be roaming around in here."

"Why not?" Tanner's anger rose by the second and he knew Darren was just as furious.

"For starters, I don't want them to overhear that their mother has a four-million dollar target on her back."

David slowly walked into the room, studying some sort of flight plan. "I'm going to Colombia."

"That's suicide right now."

"Maybe, but it's the only chance Ally has. If these guys are raising the price, I know a few of Ally's enemies that will come out of the woodwork and a few dozen of our own. It's going to be hell trying to protect her and it will get worse before it gets better. It's the only way."

Tanner nodded. "I'll come with you."

"You've done enough," Darren told him.

"I need to go alone. If I can't help the situation, they'll pick us off one by one and the last thing we need is to leave these girls unattended with their mother wandering around the high seas with a madman."

"Santino DeLuca is hardly a madman," Tanner bit out, quite offended.

Darren's gaze held his. "You obviously haven't seen the man fight."

"Five years ago we were in Bogota when a shoot-out broke out at one of the large spring flings. Remember us telling you about it?" Darren didn't wait for Tanner's reply. "DeLuca shot and killed every target there—eight of them—in twenty seconds or less. He left through a blaze of gunfire without a scratch."

"And he's with Ally," David pointed out.

"He'll keep her safe." Tanner still stood by his first decision. Santino was the one man who could protect her.

"He may fuck her too, then what?" Darren always brought up the wrong things, the kind of crazy statements that made Tanner shake with jealous rage.

Before he answered, the emergency phone rang. Tanner snatched it. "Dorsey."

"We've got a problem."

## Chapter Five

"Tell me something, Dorsey, when were you going to let me know your woman pissed off the Colombians?" Santino studied Ally. Since discovering there was a fair amount of money offered for her death, Ally withdrew and he imagined Dorsey was the only one she wanted to talk to about the situation. Right now, Dorsey was in high demand because he wanted to hear what the man had to say too.

"It's a new development. We've got someone on it."

"Well, I can only imagine how that's going. So, I'm not bringing your prize home this week, I presume?"

"You most likely won't bring her home this month."

"No complaints here, she's easy enough to entertain. I ought to pay you for the time you've allowed me so far."

The phone held a deadly silence. Dangerously quiet.

"Dorsey, I'm just fuckin' with you. The woman is here, want to talk to her?"

"Put her on."

Santino handed the phone over to Ally. "Two minutes, then I have to speak to him again."

She clutched the phone to her ear with both hands. "Tanner? Is that you?"

The only thing Santino heard was, "Hey, baby," because she walked off to ensure she had a few moments alone with her man. Damn, what he'd give to have a woman like Ally Stephens think of him as *her man*. He watched her dab away tears as she looked out over the ocean. He heard her sob when she said hello to her daughters and then he went to her. "It's time."

"Time?"

"Yes. You can call later, tomorrow." *Never again, if you're going to cry like this.*

Fuck! He'd never been around a woman crying and been affected. Damn it to hell.

"Tanner? I love you." She closed her eyes dramatically. "I will." A devious giggle and a beat later, "Me too."

Santino removed the phone from her hands. He wondered what Dorsey had said and was dying to ask but Tanner wouldn't share their secrets. Would she? He'd probe her for answers later. Maybe, or maybe it would only make him crazier by the second.

"Dorsey, did she tell you about Fernandez?"

"Yep, he means business. From what I heard in Key West, the man already had his posse positioned and waiting for him. He arrived there yesterday after we took off. He's about a day behind us."

"You're sure?" Tanner asked.

"I'm hopeful, but nothing is certain."

"That's not good enough," Tanner snapped. "All right, listen to me. You can't be that far from Islamorada, Florida."

"We're not."

"That place I told you about is empty. Darren just paid our travelers to vacate it in case you needed it, and you may."

"Yeah, guess so."

"I want you to go there for a few days. Wait for my call. Santino, I have to warn you. It's a private island, a remote area. You'll be on your own."

"Well, not exactly," Santino said, smiling at Ally. He then decided it wasn't in his best interest to further irritate his current boss or the woman who could make his job a living hell.

"Santino, I'll have everything set up and ready for you. Once you get there, stay there. Got it?"

"Got it. Hell, I hope there's something to do there other than look at your pretty little sex kitten." What the heck. He couldn't resist.

"That's the very reason this place wasn't my first choice. Try to find something to do, like watch television, but don't let her out of your sight."

"Not a problem."

"I imagine it's not," Tanner bit out. "Keep her safe."

Santino tossed the phone in the water.

"Do you toss every phone you use?"

"Right now, yeah, I do."

"Where are we headed?"

"A private island."

She rolled her eyes. "Terrific."

"I thought you'd like the idea."

"How long are we staying there?"

"Ally, look, I have to tell you something. When I signed on for this job, I realized it could last a few days or a year or more. I don't know. So knock it off with the 'are we here yet' okay?"

"But a year?" she asked, frowning.

"Yes."

"You've got to be kidding me!"

"Do you understand the kind of position you're in?"

Ally rolled her eyes once more and adjusted the top part of her lounge before she settled down for some sunbathing. "I imagine I have a better idea than you do."

"I guess so. After all, an agent with the FBI certainly has enough tools at her disposal." He sneered. "Tell me something, Agent Stephens, how did you secure your job with a bunch of criminals in the family?"

She glared at him.

"Not going to answer? Have it your way. I imagine before this is over, I'll want to send them a thank you note for training you. By the way, what weapons do you have?"

"Why?"

"Because I'd like to keep an inventory of what we have."

"Everything I have is either in my duffel bag or the front pocket of my suitcase. You're welcome to go take a look. Right now, I'm going to relax and wait for breakfast."

Santino liked her idea better than his but he'd join her for breakfast. The fighter in him was dying to see what weapons she'd brought along. The man lingering behind an ever-present erection couldn't wait to see what else she carried in her bag of tricks. She had all but given him permission to snoop and he planned to take full advantage of the opportunity.

\* \* \* \*

Santino wasn't the first man to rummage through her weaponry and he wouldn't be the last. With enough guns and ammunition to keep him entertained for a few minutes, Ally decided to test the waters. The small pool looked inviting and she needed to unwind.

She stepped into the warm, soothing waters of the hot tub and rested her neck and shoulders on the rim. "Ah, this is heaven." It was close, so close.

Her hands settled on her thighs and instinctively, she spread her legs as an afterthought. How long had it been since she'd gotten off? How long had it been since Tanner had taken her hard and wild against the bedroom wall of the hotel suite in Knoxville? Too long, so long in fact, she craved an orgasm, and for some reason, she needed one right then.

Swallowing tightly, she closed her eyes and let her hands wander over her hips. She rose up as if she wanted to pretend someone waited there with their hands, lips, or cock—Tanner. Her fingertips skimmed over her budding, erect nipples. Without the appropriate padding, the thin material was perfect for what she had in mind.

Ally wasn't an experienced woman but in the few hours she'd spent with Tanner, she'd grown to understand she was a sexual woman. Her mind raced with ideas. Thoughts of Tanner rising over her with

his hard cock swelling at her entrance drove her to reach under her bathing suit.

At the crotch, her hand was trapped against the seam once she parted her folds and dipped her fingers inside her moist, wet channel. "Oh damn, this is what I need." She rose and fell against her palm and her head rolled to the side. She plunged her fingers inside her pussy again and again.

Her mouth fell open and she sighed, working faster and faster for a quick release. She thought of Tanner's hands caressing her, his mouth puckering over her nipples, his body next to her own and his tongue—oh heavens, his tongue—burying deep inside her.

In those few seconds, she thought of only Tanner. "Um," she moaned, dying to come. Squeezing and releasing her nipple, she plunged inside her core, brushing her clit with her thumb while fucking herself into a manic frenzy. She imagined the two of them in bed together, rolling around on the mattress, licking champagne off one another as they lavished in a reunion, a joining, and a true celebration.

"Sweet." She further provoked the little button and stroked her clit harder, faster. "Oh shit." Her hand tensed, her fingers not reaching as far as the cock she wanted most now. Her body shook, her orgasm rode in faster and faster. Her chin dropped again and when it did, she captured a hard kiss, an earth-shattering, mind-blowing, life-changing kiss.

It was sinful and delicious and oh God, it was oh so wrong. She squeezed her eyes tighter, refusing to acknowledge whose mouth captured her lips, whose kiss she was in because right then, she didn't care. Not right then, not right there.

Her fingers scissored, delving inside her passage. His mouth hovered, his tongue stroked and licked. Solid, masculine fingertips covered her nipple and twirled it into a tight bead and she came. Like electric shots of pleasure struck her all at once, she writhed against her own hand while accepting his

touch and his kiss. She wrapped her arm around his neck and held him there as the tears streamed down her cheeks. "Oh God," she gasped. "What have I done?"

\* \* \* \*

Santino had no right to kiss her like this but damnation, the woman held him in a complete trance once he returned to the upper deck. She caught him by complete surprise when he rounded the corner. Her hard nipples pressing against the white, transparent material left nothing to the imagination and her whimpers—oh but yeah, they were the moans of a female—made it impossible for him to turn away.

Then he saw her hand. Good damn, how her tiny little hand moved between her soft thighs. He didn't have a sensible thought afterwards. He wanted to taste her passion and when she hungered for more, he kissed her. It was a dumb move but so far, so good.

His tongue tapped hers and he sucked it in as he twirled his around hers in a tight assurance that he was there, he was the man who'd enjoyed her orgasm, maybe even the man provoking her urgent release. He cupped her neck and pulled her up out of the water and that's when he realized he moved too fast, too soon.

Her hands flew to his chest. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I could ask you the same thing." His mouth twitched. His dick danced.

She glanced back at the water like she planned to blame her public sex act on the hot tub. Maybe it was possessed or something, though he doubted it.

"You..."

"I was doing what any other man would do in my shoes. I kissed a woman who was bringing herself pleasure and she liked it. There's nothing to discuss here, Ally."

Her rosy red cheeks flushed with the aftermath of desire. "You had no right to kiss me."

"You had no right to fuck yourself in broad daylight where the hired help can see you."

"You don't understand. There's no possible way a man like you could begin to understand." She snapped her wrist and pulled away from him.

He damn near came in his pants when he saw her. The white swimsuit clung to her skin and allowed him to see every inch of her as if the thin swimwear only provided a second covering, a duplicate skin.

"You think I don't know you have desires? I told Tanner the same thing I'm going to tell you. If you've been several months without a man, it's only a matter of time before you're going to look for one because you will need one. And baby, I'm available. I told him when I took this job that I would be if you came looking. Are you already on a search, Ally?"

"Don't talk to me about this now," she snapped.

He stalked forward. "I know you get lonely. I saw it in your eyes when I met you. I felt it just then it that kiss, and dear God, honey, I saw it in how your body reacted to your own hand."

"Stop this." She pushed by him then and when she did he grabbed her around the waist. Tightly, he pulled her against him with some level of controlled force, but his lips still slanted over hers.

With a tight lip, she resisted him at first but it only took a few minutes before he won. Just a little persistent, unmatched effort, and her arms wrapped around his neck, her mouth captured his and they were lost.

His lips searched, going deep for a satisfying kiss she didn't break. It took all the will he had to keep their connection only at a kiss. Where he'd pressed into her in the past, now he matched wits with his manhood, his desires, to ensure his cock never moved against her body. One touch, one slip of his hand, and he knew she'd be lost to him and right now he didn't want to know what desertion felt like. Right now, he wanted all she was willing to give.

She tore away from him, breathless. The yearning was there, but she was determined. "This is wrong, Santino." Her eyes flickered with a lust that ran deeper than the ocean waters.

"It might be wrong, but no one is here but me and you. No one is around to watch."

"Except the staff."

"And they work for me." And he'd talked enough.

He pulled her against him again. His lips sought hers once more and this time, he didn't want self-control to hinder his pursuits. His hand cascaded down her side, across her ass, and he held her against the rough ridges of his cock.

She squirmed, resisted, but then heaven help him, she arched.

"That's it, Ally. Let me have you. Just once, let me have you," he whispered against her neck and his tongue lapped at her skin. His palm opened under her pussy and, maneuvering the material with his finger, he pressed inside her drenching wet snatch. Once she didn't deny him, he moved it out of the way and pumped into her tight cave with a goal, an agenda—to make her come.

Her forehead rested against his shoulder as her body moved with his thrusts. "Oh God, I can't." Her body defied her so he kept his fingers moving, easing in and out, in and out.

= "Tight, damn you're so tight, Ally. Don't fight it, baby. You know you need this, ride it out. Let me feel that little snatch heat up like a hot summer day."

He wanted to fuck her. His balls were pinched so tight against his pants that he thought he felt a thread pop. His fingers twisted higher. He thrust his fingers inside her moist center with a solid reason, a good cause to keep them twirling. If he stopped before she came, she'd push him away, and give him a lame excuse he didn't want to hear.

Santino pressed his open palm against the small of her back. "Come to me, Ally, let me feel your body

milk my fingers, lover. Let go of that guarded control." His lips latched onto hers again and his hand committed to her cause. He tried to rip that damn suit to threads. If he could rip the crotch just an inch or so, he'd have better leverage, more power. He ripped her bathing suit and yeah, oh yeah, he had full mobility now.

Her screams hung in her chest, she clawed at his chest like a little vixen, a woman fighting for release, an orgasm she wanted to take but a conscience that wanted to fight it off for as long as possible. Mind over body, he knew which one would win in the end.

When she still didn't come for him, he realized what she needed, what she'd never be able to resist. He dropped to his knees and in a split second, parted her folds with his tongue.

\* \* \* \*

Ally froze. She felt him smiling against her pussy lips and she imagined him mocking her. She stumbled away from him, but somehow he held her against his lips.

"Oh, no you don't." He flattened his hands against her bottom, cupping with both hands while he sipped at her juices, uncurling his tongue right into her tight space.

"Stop." It didn't sound like her voice. The request squeaked out into the open air in a pleading tone. "I don't like it. I mean it. Stop."

"You like it, Ally. I can tell how much you love it." But he released her. Her juices were on his lips and he looked like a man ready to take things all the way to the bedroom. After he stood, he touched her parted lips with his fingertips. "You want this. I know *you need this.*"

"Look what you've done." She stared down the length of her body, examining the soft material of her swimsuit. She cried and Santino pulled her against him.

"I'm not sorry," he said hoarsely.

"I am," she assured him, pushing him away. She bent down to retrieve several pieces of her swimsuit and wrapped the towel around her trembling body. "It won't happen again."

She hurriedly walked across the deck and before she disappeared, he called out a promise she heard all too loud and clear. "Ally, you have no idea what the future holds but one thing I can predict is something you can deny all you want. I am going to be in *your bed* each and every night. And while I may be there to protect you, it's only a matter of time before you want me there for all the right reasons."

Hurriedly, in a panic, she picked up her pace, practically ran down the spiral steps, and flew through the open the door of the master bedroom. She rushed across the plush carpeting and quickly made her way into the master bath, where she immediately started her bath water. She had to wash off his smell, his maddening, controlling, all-male aroma. If she didn't get the scent of him off of her skin, she was going to come undone and when she did, he'd be there waiting for her.

## Chapter Six

Santino didn't look up when she joined him for dinner. He reached for a bowl of asparagus and focused on the meal instead of the woman he wanted to take as his appetizer, or maybe even save for dessert.

"I want to call Tanner."

"Not tonight. We have set guidelines we follow, on his orders. You're not going to break them just so you can clear your conscience and ease your guilt." He cut his steak and then slowly moved the fork to his lips.

"I want to talk to my girls. This has nothing to do with what happened earlier."

He rose from his chair and walked across the room. He shut the atrium doors so the staff wouldn't overhear their conversation. "This has everything to do with what happened earlier. It's the only reason you locked yourself away in the stateroom, which by the way, won't happen again." He took his seat once more. "I am supposed to protect you, not let you out of my sight. Those are my orders."

Ally studied him before she glared at the plate in front of her.

"It's good. Rios is an excellent chef."

"I'm sure." Ally tossed the cloth napkin across her lap. She picked up her fork and played with her food, unable to look at him. "Have you ever been in love before?"

"Me? No. I'm not a man who falls for a piece of ass. Women have their place—it's bent over or spread open; outside of those two positions, there are few others that appeal to me longer than a few minutes."

She didn't know why but suddenly she was relieved to hear that. She felt her lips curve in a smile, and soon she was laughing.

"Like that, huh?"

"Yeah, well, I guess I'm easily amused. How many years did you practice that one? I bet you've said those very words to several women in your lifetime."

"Actually, you're the first," he said, jabbing the fork in her direction. It occurred to her then. Santino didn't look as relaxed as he had when she first joined him. He cleared his throat and added, "But hey don't sweat it, I'm sure I'll say them again since they seemed to work their charms on you."

"You certainly have a few unusual pick-up lines." She cut her steak in small little pieces and then jabbed a slice with her fork, bringing the succulent beef to her mouth.

"I have more."

"I'm sure."

"Do you want me to use them?" He dabbed his lips with the corner of the beige napkin and tossed the cloth on the tablecloth. He glanced up at the mirrors over the dining room table. "You know, I'm beginning to think whoever owned this yacht first had a thing for mirrors in all the right places."

She looked up too and saw the vantage point immediately. Her cleavage was pushed up over her bright red blouse and by the time her gaze met his again, his lips were moist. He took a swig from his glass.

"I didn't offer to fix you a drink. Would you like anything?"

"No, I'm fine, thanks."

"Don't trust yourself on liquor?"

"I don't drink much."

"Well, that shot that plan all to hell." He crossed his thick arms over his chest.

"How long before we arrive at the island?" Ally changed the subject.

"Without complications, we'll be there by the time you wake up in the morning."

"You're not sleeping tonight, I take it?"

"Pirates. I have to watch for them."

"Pirates?"

"Yep, we have a lot of them floating around out here. They search for yachts with beautiful women and men with cocks so hard they never see the enemy sneaking up on them."

Ally laughed. "You just don't quit, do you?"

"Baby, you have no idea. I push and push, and I do it when it counts most."

Her face was probably bright red. Rather than argue, Ally decided to eat and try to manage that in some measure of silence. If she didn't banter back and forth, he'd give it up as a lost cause.

At one point, Santino fixed another drink and strolled from the dining area to the deck. It was then Ally noticed the piped-in music playing softly in the background.

Against her better judgment, she went to the bar and poured an apple brandy and joined him outside. A flicker of color lit up the black sky and she thought she saw a burst of some sort of design. He nodded in the same direction. "Someone is shooting off fireworks, doesn't look like a bad show."

Before she thought about it, she moved to the rail and stood beside him. Sure enough, a lovely display of fireworks splayed across the sky forming various shapes. Steely Dan's *Deacon Blues* played softly in the distance.

From the corner of her eye, she watched him. Santino was a good-looking man. His chiseled features included great bone structure, a strong square jaw, thick lips, and disheveled coal black hair, a perfect match for his dark eyes. He had four or five days growth of beard, trimmed and far from unkempt. Then there was the body, the part she needed to avoid most. Hard arms, harder chest, cut thighs, and she bet on a case of abs.

"Santino, what's your last name?"

"Why does it matter?"

"It doesn't. Well, I guess it does." She smiled nervously. "I guess I want to at least know who kissed me, since—"

"Since what?"

"*That* doesn't matter."

"It might."

She shook her head and then shivered as another four explosions filled the sky. Various shades decorated the darkness.

"Are you cold?"

"No, I'm going to go in after I finish my drink, anyway. It's just the boom-factor."

"The boom-factor?"

"You know, the noise from the fireworks."

"Tough FBI woman like yourself is afraid of an explosion?"

"Years ago, Steve—my partner—and I were on a stake-out on the fourth of July. It was a dirty deal expected to go bad and it did. We lost several agents that night and a lot of it was because of how and when the shots were fired."

"I see." He moved closer. "You weren't shot, were you?"

"Oh, heavens no. Are you kidding me? Back then, Tanner had such a tight tail on me that if a bullet had grazed the skin, he would've pulled me off the case, kicking and screaming."

"So you and Tanner, you go way back, huh?"

She nodded, that sorrow-filled smile covering her face. She tried to stop it so he wouldn't read too much into it, but it was too late. She'd been told all too often by Steve that it was an expression she wore often and once or twice, she even saw it for herself when she looked at her reflection. Now, she recognized it without the necessity of a mirror to double-check for accuracy.

"I imagine it's been a rocky road since you've been working to fight the very things Tanner profits from."

"We've had our moments."

"How many of them?" he asked, staring into her eyes. "How many, Ally?"

"What?"

"You know what I'm asking. I want to know how many *intimate moments* you've shared with him."

She didn't want to answer him, yet she found herself blurting it out in spite of what she wanted. "I was with Tanner one time when I got pregnant with the girls. One time, and everything went to hell."

"That's it? You've been with him one time?"

"Well, no. Since then, there have been a couple of times, passing in the night—that sort of thing." She laughed and then whispered, "Not many though, too few."

"But never anyone else?"

"You ask a lot of questions." She nudged him with her glass. "Since you have a lot of them, fix me another apple brandy, and I might answer one or two."

"I thought you didn't drink."

"Two after-dinner drinks never killed anyone."

He returned with a bottle of water for himself and her dark liquor swirling around in her tumbler. The boat gently rocked up and down, closer and closer to the colors in the night. The boom caused her to flinch again. This time, he didn't acknowledge her when she jerked.

"Steve and Marcel, who else?"

"I didn't sleep with Steve or Marcel, not that it's any of your business." She sipped her drink. "Those are the only questions I'm answering. Save a few for another night."

"Not a problem. We have a few ahead of us." He sat down on the lounge and with his palms flat against the cushions, he stretched his legs out in front of him. "Let me ask one more."

"On one condition?"

"What's that?"

"You don't ask any other ridiculous questions about potential lovers."

"Not a problem. See, that's why I have to ask this one." His gaze skimmed downward and locked at her crotch. "Ally, have you ever been with anyone else, other than Tanner?"

She tilted her chin high and thought again about refusing the man. Again, she didn't go with her first instinct. "You shouldn't ask personal questions."

"This one is important."

"Why?"

"I want to know if I take you to bed if I'm taking a woman with experience or a woman who saved herself for the wrong man."

"Tanner is not the wrong man."

"Maybe not, but I'm beginning to think he's the wrong man for you."

\* \* \* \*

Santino had never been in love. He'd never loved a woman with anything other than his cock and he never mistakenly let the dirty deed interfere with his work. He had a motto similar to the old adage, *Love 'em and leave 'em*. Only, his was *Leave 'em in love*.

He didn't play around as much as his reputation suggested because he stayed on the move a lot. Typically, he found a woman to service his needs while he was in a particular area, and he treated her real nice. Took her roses, a few gifts, and then disappeared before she had the chance to become too attached. He'd met a few families too, something he regretted because he imagined a few brothers and fathers out there would love to get a hold of him and string him up by his nuts.

Still, he never lied to a woman. He never told her he was hers to have and to hold. He never wanted to be that kind of man.

Until now.

He gnawed on his bottom lip and wondered why now. From the moment he saw her, he was sunk. It was all over. And damn it, here she was professing her love for a man he rarely crossed.

He watched Ally sleep. Dressed in her pastel pajamas, she looked like she was barely legal. He practically had to beg her to slip into something more comfortable. Fortunately, she had a little buzz going and let him help her. She had held onto his shoulders with soft, inviting eyes but he saw the alcohol tripping her out and he wasn't about to move in with that advantage. If they had their time, and they would, it wasn't going to happen when she was three sheets to the wind.

When he helped her out of her low-cut top and into her silky-smooth tank, she'd turned her back to him. It didn't matter. The mirrors in the room allowed him to see it all. Those soft, luscious breasts were enough to have his cock twitching all over again. He couldn't wait to lose his pants now that blue balls reminded him of the excruciating pain a man experienced when a lady had him right where she wanted him.

Only Ally didn't want him, or did she?

When he'd turned down the sheets earlier, Ally tripped onto the mattress with only one whisper, one pleading request. "Please don't take advantage of me."

He'd kissed her forehead and tucked her in like a small, fragile doll anyone might break given the right opportunity. "Sleep tight," he'd told her before he turned out the light.

Now he stood at the bay window, looking out into the darkness, waiting for the first signs of trouble. Afraid it might exist there, and scared to death that if it did, he wouldn't see it headed his way.

\* \* \* \*

"DeLuca," he whispered into the phone around six o'clock in the morning. "Don't you ever sleep, man?"

"I sleep when I know where Ally is and that she's safe." Tanner's voice held a lot of concern.

"She's still resting. I've been up all night trying to watch for her friends."

"Any sign of them?"

"No, but they're out there."

"Your buddy Bolzro gave a good description of the boat and of you as well to two of our guys. Money is talking him right out of silence."

"I was afraid of that."

"Me too. I told Darren and David he'd be a problem but they thought if they paid him enough hush money, he'd go away. He wants more."

"I'll have someone take care of it," Santino promised.

Ally stirred and he caught the glimpse of her pink skin. The little vixen had been in the morning sun long enough the day before to flush her rosy cheeks and the rest of her exposed body parts. His dick throbbed when he relived those brief moments, remembering how she tasted on his lips when he parted her damp folds with his tongue. God, what he would've paid to have spent just a few more minutes there, sipping at her like a stout drink.

"So Ally's okay?"

"She's fine."

"Everything is in order at the house. We're working on the Colombians but, Santino, they've raised it again. Five million for her dead, and seven if she's brought in untouched."

"What?" He damn near raged when he heard the words spoken. He realized his anger allowed him to show his hand.

Silence stilled the conversation. "Santino?"

"I'm here."

"Is anything going on I should know about?"

"No, between that creep Marcel, sleep deprivation, and a woman who is hell bent on doing things her way, I'm fine."

Tanner chuckled, though it came across stiff, forced. "Take care of her."

"You got it." He snapped the phone shut and walked over to the bed. He itched to take her in his arms. He wanted to embrace her so he knew without

a doubt that if anyone touched her, if anyone dared to hold her, the arms around her would only be his own.

## Chapter Seven

Ally stood in the foyer, looking around at their new temporary residence. "It's ostentatious, don't you think?"

"Are you surprised?" Santino checked the house with her on his heels.

"It's too big, if you ask me. If we're blind-sided, attacked, I mean, then we're kind of sitting ducks here."

"Not if we plan ahead."

"So far, I haven't seen a blueprint for success here," she pointed out.

"Darlin', if you knew the things I had in store for us, then you wouldn't make such an assumption."

"I'm talking about the layout of the place."

He scanned her body. "Yeah, me too."

"Such a funny guy," she said, strutting by him.

He released a dry chuckle, continued opening closets, slamming drawers, and looking for anything that might suggest dangerous intruders beat them there.

"Did I hear you on the phone with Tanner this morning?"

"Yeah, he called early." He wondered why she hadn't asked to speak to him. The day before, she practically put up a fight just to call him with a report on their escapades.

"Anything new?" Staying right behind him, she followed him into the master bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed while he examined the windows and locks, securing them.

"Not yet," he lied. "No news is good news, right?"

"You're forgetting who you're talking to, Santino. I was one of the best agents in the field."

"I'm sure you were the best. For the record, I keep that in mind at all times. I know there may be a point when I'll need you at my back." *Or on yours.* He didn't verbalize the last part.

"Well, I guess we're good then," she said.

"All clear here."

"Great. I'm planning to spend the day by the pool. I'd hate to waste a beautiful day inside again."

"Sounds like an idea." *A darned good one, too.* Damn it all, if he saw her in a bathing suit again, he was going to either come in his pants or throw her down and pound into her like a sudden storm.

Ally looked away. "I don't need a bodyguard all the time, you know."

"Actually, I have some work to do. I won't bother you if you don't bother me. Deal?" His defiant tone wasn't really pointed at her but sexual frustration drew out the hateful side of a man, particularly him.

"But you're going to work poolside, no doubt."

"Absolutely. I think the scenery there will be better than anything this five mile island has to offer."

"Oh, stop flirting."

"Who's flirting?" He leaned in and kissed her lightly on the mouth before he passed by her. He shouldn't have, he knew it when he dropped the kiss on her lips, but he couldn't resist. Until Tanner married her, she was open game, and he planned to pursue her until she flat out refused him, which she hadn't.

Her fingertips slid across her lip. It would've been all he offered her if he hadn't noticed the way she caressed where his lips left an intended bittersweet memory.

"Ally?"

She blinked and shook her head. "I'll get ready and meet you by the pool."

He took a deep breath. What was stopping him? Not a damn thing. He grabbed her arm and pulled her up, wrapping his arms around her tightly. Then, he

kissed her again, placing a peck here and there. "You have few choices now since I ripped your swimsuit to shreds. I could give the staff strict orders to stay away from the pool and we could go skinny dipping."

"I have a few swimsuits. Thank you very much."

"Anything that covers your ass?" He fondly remembered a thong-style swimsuit he found in one of the side pockets of her luggage.

"Snoop much?"

"No, but I happen to like the remaining choices. Wear the black thong."

"You're impossible!" She squirmed out of from his arms and dropped to the floor in front of her bags.

He should've walked out right then. He had a brain, a little will power, and a lot riding on her safe return to a man who apparently loved her so much he couldn't sleep without her in his arms. Still, he did the unthinkable. He dropped to the floor, slid in behind her like he'd done it two hundred and fifty times. His legs pressed against her thighs. His cock pressed against the small of her back.

"Santino, what are you doing?" she asked barely above a whisper.

He was tearing down her defenses and he was doing a masterful job. "Ally, let me ask you something."

"You ask too many questions," she remarked, jiggling the zipper on her suitcase.

"Too bad, it's the nature of my business."

"No, it's curiosity driving the man."

With his back against a sofa, he placed his hands at her sides and hauled her into a secure embrace, locking his arms over her full chest. "Ally, I want to know what you think about when we're together like this." His lips scraped over the nape of her neck and he moved her hair to the side so his mouth was free to explore her silky skin, drink in the womanly scent of her flesh. "I have needs Ally and I want to find out more about the woman, not the agent on the run, or Tanner Dorsey's lover from the past." His lips brushed

across her shoulder. He held her thin arm in his hands and kissed a path down to her elbow, paying close attention to the chill bumps changing the texture of her warm skin.

Lifting her over him, he turned her. Her legs splayed over his and he cupped her face. "Dear God," he whispered. Had he ever found another woman more interesting or appealing?

He closed his eyes and cursed his growing length. It did nothing to still the lust, nothing in fact, but stir the growing need to be with her. He gathered the material covering her breast and sucked it in to his dangerously motivated mouth, licking the covered point erect from his deliberate enticement.

"Santino..." She didn't protest and if she did, those wondering fingers twirling through his hair suggested something else entirely.

His fingers took a hike, rushing up and down her inner thighs. "Tell me, Ally. Something, anything, tell me how you feel when you're with me just like this." He framed her face and his lips fell upon hers in a hungry kiss, an inspiring, if not dominating tale of two lovers coming together by a force larger than either of them cared to translate.

They had undeniable chemistry. It was magnetic, intoxicating, and damn it all, he couldn't escape the possibility that he could fall in love with a woman like Ally.

She pushed him away. "Santino, please don't do this to me."

"Okay," he whispered, taking her lips again. This time, he moved her body over his cock, watching as their bodies swayed together, grinding out the imperative passion building between them.

She was carefree like the wind. Her hair fanned around her shoulders. She tilted her chin, exposing her neck and his mouth obliged. His hunger spiraled out of control.

He lapped at her skin, loving the taste of her. The kisses were hotter. His appetite growing and his thirst

for her would not be easily quenched. He wedged the weight of his cock between her thighs and even through their clothes, he felt her moisture and knew he was getting to her. He could persuade her but did he really want her if he had to coerce her into his bed?

Fuck yeah. He was a man.

He pressed his forehead to hers. "*No* it is, once again, eh?" But he was also a gentleman, at least he would be, for Ally.

She closed her eyes. "I love Tanner. I can't do this. This isn't right. I can't let the lust I have for you cloud my judgment or distract you from the job you have to do." She touched his cheek and he could've sworn she set him on fire. "Don't you see?" She searched his eyes. "I can't let these wild and crazy moments ruin what I have with Tanner or the life we're waiting to build together. I wouldn't want him to do what I'm doing with another woman."

"I understand." He swallowed stiffly, released a disappointed moan and then reluctantly rose from the floor. She started fiddling with her luggage again.

Santino paced the floor, rubbing his jaw with the ball of his hand. "Ally, do you think he's waited for you?"

Tanner would kill him for placing an element of doubt in her mind. He didn't have the right to do that to Tanner, but he was a man grasping at straws. No, if he were to be honest with himself a better explanation for his motives, existed. He wanted Ally's attention, her affection, and God help him, maybe even her love.

"I know he has."

"Do you?"

"Of course," she replied curtly. "If I didn't believe in his love, I'd already have you stripped down to your boxers and making all sorts of foolish promises."

He winked. "That's what I like to hear." Only, it did little to encourage him.

Resigning himself to the fact Ally needed a little more time, Santino decided he'd get some work done. He started for the hallway and right when he did, he caught a quick movement, several images flashed before his eyes. "Ally, get down!" He dashed across the room and plucked Ally from the floor, shoving her into the hallway.

"Damn it to hell." She kicked the back wall behind her. "I have to get my duffel bag. Cover me." Before he could stop her, she flipped across the room twice, seized the bag and returned with it in a blaze of gunfire.

"Do that again, and I'll shoot you myself." Good grief, had he ever seen anyone move any faster? He shot her a look and took a deep breath. God help him, for a brief second, he thought he may have lost her. Bullets were ricocheting off the furniture. He cupped the side of her face and pursed his lips. "Stay down, and stay behind me. No funny stuff."

"Got it."

He pulled a phone from his pocket. "We've got trouble here! Account for everyone on the boat and do it now. Call back and let me know who we've got positioned where. We've got to get out of here! Ambushed upon arrival.

While he spat orders and relayed data, Ally flew by him. "Damn it, woman!

She tumbled across the floor, rolled over once, flattened herself against the carpet and delivered two shots to a man's groin.

She dropped him to his knees with the first one but she made sure he caught another final blow.

"Ally! Stay down!" Santino stepped into the room, firing one round after another.

"Shit!" Agonizing pain rang out around the room as another intruder dodged a couple of bullets.

"Santino, behind you!" she screamed, rushing from the closet where she'd hid to reload. She raised a steady arm and unloaded her ammunition, dodging a few bullets in the process.

"Fucking cunt!"

Santino glanced over his shoulder and saw her rush to the bed and use the mattress for cover. A thick French accent pierced through the foyer. Three men were brought down by Santino and one more fell to his knees, thanks to Ally thinking fast enough on her feet to drop to her sweet little knees.

Santino would forever be indebted to her. That intruder snuck up behind him and he undoubtedly had a bullet with his name on it, No doubt, if Ally hadn't been on her game, the blood spilling now would be his own.

Santino grabbed her by her wrist and they jumped over a few bodies and right as they headed outside, one man grabbed Santino around the throat while another one lying on the floor grabbed Ally's ankle.

"Santino!"

The perpetrator forced her to the ground.

Santino struggled to free himself from the man wrestling him to the floor. "Ally!"

A criminal's hand settled on her ass. "Tell me something, gorgeous. What's that hot little twat going to do for the Colombians? Why is it worth more untouched? Are your walls covered in priceless gold or is it a tight little snatch just itching for a wild man's ride?" His hand slid from her ass to her pussy. A few seconds later and Santino freed himself from a chokehold by shooting the man who held him.

He reloaded and fired, standing over the man who made him mad as all hell. "Yeah, you bastard. Some might even say worth more than the gold offered." He kicked the perverted SOB's corpse a few times and then grabbed Ally by the hand and sprinted for the front door.

Once outside, they ran across the expansive lawn, leaping across split logs, and clinging to one another in an effort to catch their balance when they topped a ridge they weren't expecting. There, they spotted the yacht in the distance.

"There, Ally," Santino said, pointing toward a clearing.

They headed downhill. Santino scanned the area, keeping his eyes wide and preparing for anything. They came to the cliffs again. Below them, they spotted the crew rushing back to the boat. They were all well informed of how they should respond in times of trouble and from the look of things, they reacted appropriately.

"We've got about six minutes, Ally, before we're left behind. Can you make it?"

"I can if you can," she assured him. She doubled over, caught her breath, quickly took in their surroundings, trying to figure out the best route down, and then took off like a true athlete, skipping across one pile of rocks, and jumping over another. Occasionally, Santino grabbed her hand, and helped her make her way through the roughest terrain. Looking behind him, he saw one of the injured pull out a few devices and he understood what came next.

They only had one way out.

"Jump, Ally! Jump now!" He grabbed her hand and refused to let go. They took off at a running go, their feet dangling in the air as an explosion rocked the land above them.

They rolled across the sand and Santino sprang to his feet, dragging her behind him. Without looking back, they ran as fast as they could, making it to the speed boat in time to follow the yacht back into the open waters and the temporary safety net of familiar surroundings.

\* \* \* \*

"You're hurt." Santino helped her from the small boat onto the yacht.

As a matter of fact, he was right. As luck would have it, she seemed to move slower than normal and had a throbbing pain in her hip.

"I'm fine," she snapped.

He grabbed a nearby chair and dragged it across the deck. "Here, sit down. I'll be right back."

Santino tossed her the phone. "Dial Dorsey back and tell him his little home in the islands just went up in smoke." He scanned the faces of his nervous staff and crew. He barked orders, those she didn't try to overhear. She was on a mission. She wanted blood—some of Tanner's would do or some from those who'd tried to hit pay dirt with her body.

"Talk to me, DeLuca. You'd better tell me my baby is fine or else you're a dead man."

"DeLuca?" She immediately noticed Santino's shoulders stiffen. *Well, I'll be damned.* She acted unimpressed and turned her attention, never mind her fury, back to Tanner.

"Ally? Is that you?"

"It's me."

"Oh, thank God. It's not Marcel. We've got a lock on him. Seems his ship is about to sink and he's in a marina near Miami."

"These men, Tanner, they had a thick French accent, some spoke the language fluently, some only spoke English."

"How many?"

"I don't know. The body count will be tough to get, too. Your house is gone."

"It's fine, Ally. It's fine. How about Santino, did he make it out okay?"

"Yes, he's with the crew, trying to talk them into staying with us."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I'm not, but I am pissed. I've had time to think about this and I have a few bones to pick with you." Her sass with Tanner was a given. They always had their share of friendly verbal fire.

She walked toward the bow of the boat. "I left a good job, one with great benefits. I walked away for what, Tanner? Huh? Tell me, because dodging bullets and dealing with drug lords is part of my everyday job description but so help me, the FBI never put me in

this kind of danger! Do you have anything at all to say for yourself?"

"Ally," he said softly. "Honey, listen to me."

"No. I didn't think so." She continued to pace and rant. "It's always been this way with us. You decided when you'd finally kiss me, you made the decision of when you'd finally fuck me, then obviously—and not that I'm complaining—you made the decision of when we'd have kids, though I'm sure I had something to do with that, too, but the point is this—"

"I love you, Ally." He released a heavy breath and the hairs stood up on the back of her neck. "I do, Ally. I love you more than you'll ever know."

She hated it when he did that. She could almost see him crossing his arms over his swollen chest, swelled with pride, no doubt.

"I love you too, but I gotta tell you, I'm beginning to see that there is very little in this relationship for me. It's what you want, what messes I have to clean up that you make, it's really started to chap my ass." She started to slap her own tail when she realized she had a significant problem. "Oh shit."

"Ally? Is everything okay? Ally?"

"Damn it to hell!" Realizing her hand landed in a pool of red blood, she grated back more curse words. "And now, to beat it all, it appears someone has shot me in the fucking ass!" She slammed the phone shut and tossed it in the water before she paraded by the staff and then fell face first into Santino's arms.

## Chapter Eight

Ally felt like she lived in another time and place. Maybe the Old West or perhaps she was riding on the range rather than floating on water. No, she was most definitely on water. Her belly reminded her again and again. The boat found a cruising speed guaranteed to bring about motion sickness.

She remembered hearing something said about two bullets. Sure enough, at some point during the night, two large slugs were placed in a metal bowl. She remembered hearing the cling-clangs right after the bullets were removed. At one point, she thought she heard David's voice, but she was probably delusional. Then another voice told Santino to 'keep her sedated' and then there was a vague memory of something about antibiotics.

She was in and out. Once she woke up to Santino, another time she woke up to a man who kept his back to her, again the one who resembled her brother David, and another time, she could've sworn Tanner was there, too. Was Tanner there? Had he come for her? Probably not, and he shouldn't. He needed to stay with Molly and Holly. Someone needed to protect her precious little girls.

"It's been four days. Today, the sedatives stop." She heard Santino arguing with someone. "Look, I know you have her best interests at heart but she took two shots to the ass. Her injuries were not life-threatening and she doesn't have a fever. She'll be fine. I told you, she's a fighter." He sounded proud.

"Tanner? Santino?" She called out to both men, assuming both were there. Santino entered the room. "Santino, what happened?" She was groggy.

She forgot all about Tanner the minute she saw Santino.

"You don't remember?"

"I remember talking to Tanner on the phone, looking down, seeing a lot of blood, and then trying to make it to the stateroom."

"Stay with me, sunshine," Santino said, sitting down and taking her hand.

"Then, nothing. How long have I been out?"

"Four days."

"Was Tanner here?"

"David is here. He wants to talk to you before he leaves. We thought you were going to have to have a blood transfusion and you two share the same blood type. Who knew such a small ass had so much cushion back there."

"Don't. Just don't. I'd rather you spare the jokes at the expense of my ass."

"And a pretty ass it is." He took her hand in both of his. "Are you hungry?"

"No, but I'd like to have some fresh air, though."

"Then fresh air it is." He grabbed her robe and tried to help her get out of bed.

"I don't need that damned thing. I'm in pajamas, for crying out loud."

"With nipples as hard as cannonballs." He smacked his lips and ran his thumb over one to prove a valid point. "Are you sure you want your brother taking back a report like that to Tanner?"

"At this point I don't care. Tanner is responsible for my ass being shot to hell and back."

"Here, let me get you a sweatshirt." After walking over to the closet, Santino returned with a navy blue selection. Across the front, it sported bold red print. "Property of Tanner Dorsey." He held it up and grinned. "Is he always this possessive?"

"Yes."

"I'll give the guy credit. He knows how to keep a girl loyal, huh? The subtle reminders he leaves for you are a nice touch."

"Bet he doesn't know who's been taking care of my ass, does he?"

"As a matter of fact, the doc said for me to massage your bottom every day for the next thirty to forty-five days so I've been working you over pretty good in front of that brother of yours."

"Glad to see you haven't lost the ability to entertain yourself while I've been sleeping the morning away."

"Uh, it's almost seven here. In Ally's world, I'm sure time varies considerably."

Ally studied Santino. "Did you get laid or something?"

He chuckled. "Hell no, why?"

"You're in an exceptionally good mood."

He licked his lips and then bent down to lift her up. He cradled her against his body, and whispered in her ear, "Why wouldn't I be in the best of moods? I've had that bare ass of yours against my thigh for the last several nights and with any luck, we've bypassed the modesty elements and we're working on keeping you coherent for the best of finales."

Ally giggled and then passed out against his shoulder.

"It wasn't that funny." He kissed the top of her head and carried her up to the main deck. Releasing her, he positioned her in one of the loungers, facing her brother.

"She's out again? Are you sure she's all right?"

"Doc says it'll take a few days. I can't thank you enough for getting him here when you did."

David stared at Santino, "Isn't that something I would say? Something like, 'DeLuca, I can't thank you enough for looking after Ally? Risking your own life to save hers and effectively doing your job deserves a bonus.'"

Santino refused to look at him until he decided how to proceed. He needed to take his time before he made a final decision. He'd had a few days to think about a lot of things as he listened to Ally's dreams and her nightmares. He'd held her when she cried, bathed her in ice rags when her fever reached

dangerous levels, and rocked her when she screamed. He wasn't going to ignore the fact that some very strong feelings were developing, and they were mutual.

"You care about her, don't you?" This David character was straight-forward. Maybe he'd save him further inner deliberation.

"I do."

"I told Tanner this was a mistake. I warned him from the beginning that if he put her in your care, he'd have to worry about more than her safety and apparently, I was right."

Ally stirred and they both watched her.

"Hang on. I'll be right back." Santino disappeared inside the salon and then returned with an afghan. He wrapped the coverlet around her small frame. "She should wake up in a few minutes. She's been in and out all afternoon."

David frowned. "Does she care about you?"

"I don't know, I guess that's something you'll have to ask her."

"Are you fucking her?"

"Hell no! What kind of question is that? A brother doesn't ask a man those questions."

"This brother does."

David stood over Ally. He lightly touched her cheek. "She was the baby, you know. Darren and I took care of her. We told Tanner to leave her out of this and he wouldn't. He had to have her. Now that he has her, I'm not willing to let someone come in and screw up what they've waited years to have. You understand?"

Santino pursed his lips. Damn it. He expected this kind of conversation with Dorsey, not Ally's rogue brothers.

\* \* \* \*

Ally jerked. "David?"

"I'm here."

"Thank you for coming. Why didn't Tanner come?"

"Ally, Santino's going to have to explain everything to you. It's complicated. Tanner isn't free to move about the country right now, let alone the world."

"Is he in jail or something?"

"Nothing like that." He patted her head and then turned to Santino and said, "I need a few minutes with my sister."

"Sure. Ally, do you need anything?"

"No, not yet." She turned her focus to David and she was ready for him. The expression on his face wasn't one she was unfamiliar with at all. She'd seen it countless times as a teenager when he was about to bring down a gavel or run off another boyfriend he just didn't like for whatever reason.

"How are you feeling? Really?"

"David, how would you feel if some asshole fired two rounds into your butt? How do you think I feel?" She wasn't listening to one damned thing about Santino and by the concern washing over his face, the fright in his eyes—that's where he planned to take the conversation in a hurry.

"I need to talk to you about DeLuca." There it was again. She forgot all about Tanner calling Santino by his surname. She understood more about the man protecting her now that she put two and two together.

Santino DeLuca was a wanted man and his name showed up on several agency lists, including America's Most Notorious Killers on the Run. Ally never quite understood why so many agents wanted to find him in the first place. From what she could tell, he only killed the scum of the earth—mob guys who killed for no apparent reason and those who ran in their inner circles. As far as she was concerned, he saved the good guys a whole lot of trouble, money, and man power.

Ally knew the DeLuca name from her earliest days as an agent. He was a killer, trained in foreign affairs, weapons, and money laundering. He

protected those who wanted to pay his price and it was typically high.

Right now, Santino had her back. Right now, he was there to protect her. Where were the rest of them when she needed them? Where was Tanner's posse when she needed them most?

"Ally, he's off limits. He's bad news." David interrupted her thoughts.

"I remember hearing the same about Tanner and for your information, I'm still in love with Tanner. He's the only man I've ever loved."

"And you're halfway in love with Santino, too."

"Don't get involved in this, David. I'm not discussing Santino with you or anyone."

"Ally, I can't let this happen—you'll start a war bigger than you'll be able to control. You don't understand. There's more to Tanner's relationship with Santino than you know and Tanner has sacrificed a lot to keep you safe."

"And what about me? Huh? What have I sacrificed? Let me tell you, let me *remind you*. I've given that man my life, my career, my love, my girls, my loyalty—"

It was particularly difficult for her to even think about Molly and Holly right then. "David, he took and took until he had everything I had to give!"

David gave her a minute to regain some element of composure. "Ally, Santino DeLuca is a cold-blooded killer."

"And he's no worse than you, Darren, or Tanner." She bit out the accusation and saw the sorrow in her brother's eyes.

"I'm not keeping this from Tanner."

"I never imagined you would."

"You want me to tell him you're in love with this guy?"

"I don't know what I feel for him yet but if that's the way you translate it, then you may be right. If so, then I imagine Tanner will still win. He always does, doesn't he?"

"Tanner would let you go but he would never let you have the girls. Know that, Ally. If you choose this guy over your family, you're choosing to lose the girls."

"Who said anything about letting anyone go, David?"

"Oh, now that's funny." He studied her for a long time. "You think Tanner will share you with DeLuca? You must've took a few slugs to the head, too, because I swear you've lost every inch of common sense I thought you had!"

"And you've talked more to me in the last ten minutes than you ever have in your entire life!"

David set his jaw. "I told him this would happen."

"What would happen?"

"I just told him it was a bad idea and he wouldn't listen."

"Why? Why did you tell him it was a bad idea? I mean, after all, I lived with Marcel for several years, standing by while he used my daughters to bait their father. I stood by as a teenager and watched as Tanner took one girl and then another to his bed. I have given up everything for him and did he show up here? Hell no!"

"Actually, Ally, he did." A voice of reason interrupted them. Santino stepped outside with a few bottles of water swinging freely from his hip. "It wasn't safe for him to stay, but he *was* here."

"Great, I need a shot in the mouth more than anywhere else. It's *painfully* obvious I should learn to keep my trap shut." Her vision blurred and she immediately snapped. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to know that if Tanner would try a little honesty with you, then maybe you wouldn't self-destruct." He addressed David. "You can tell him what I said, by the way." He handed David a twenty-ounce water bottle.

"All of you tell despicable lies or you lie by refusing to tell the whole truth and then you want me

to march to some kind of traitorous tune because you order me to do it." She took the bottle Santino offered. "Thank you." She glared at her brother. "David, we left behind a heavy body count. I was an agent with the FBI, for crying out loud and this is not who I am! When and if anyone goes there to clean up the mess, they're going to have a hot trail leading back to me. My luggage is still there."

Santino sat down. "No, we've sent for everything. Cleanup secured the place. Twenty-three dead. No witnesses."

David arched an eyebrow. "See, Ally. *Cleanup* took care of it."

She caught his underlying meaning and ignored him. So what if Santino had crews of men, armies for that matter, that swept up his messes? She returned to the reason her heart was racing. "Tanner was here?"

"Yeah, he walked right in on us having a grand old' time."

"I bet."

"Well, at least one of us was able to enjoy the moment. I was about to bandage that sweet little ass."

Santino took a hearty swig of his water and glared at David. "A pretty little apple bottom just as cute as—"

"That's it!" She stood up too fast and returned to her seat just as fast when she lost her balance. Both men tried to catch her.

"Ally, are you okay?" David asked.

"She's healing," Santino informed him, lying next to her and hoisting her into his arms. He cradled her body against his, much to her surprise and her brother's dismay. "Ally doesn't need this shit right now. This may be hard for you to accept and it was tough for Tanner too. Whatever you guys have put her through these last few years came out in the form of nightmares and dreams. The doctor says she's a nervous breakdown waiting to happen and my guess is

that everyone has been so busy dodging bullets and helping the money-flow that they haven't stopped to notice."

"Ally?" David's look of concern overwhelmed her.

"I'm fine."

Santino held her closer. "She thinks she's fine. For starters, Ally is anemic. She doesn't have the energy you people—her family—seem to think she has. Secondly, she carries around enough guilt to make her borderline crazy and finally, she doesn't have a life outside of the one you allow her to live—the one that doesn't include her daughters because you took away the very people she loves." His voice was firm and carried through with a deliberate and meticulous delivery. His monologue was incredible. Ally was tempted to applaud the effort.

David probably wanted to kill him.

"That's it," David spat, glaring at Santino. "We'll make other arrangements to keep Ally safe until we can take her home."

Reading between the lines, Santino gave him food for thought when he said, "If Ally had been there on that island with anyone else, she'd already be wrapped around that drug lord's slimy body or maybe even scattered across the Andes Mountains. We worked together and made it out of a bad situation, alive. Dorsey can take me off this if he wants to, but for once, maybe you'll both try to consider Ally. Either way, I'm not going away. I'll shadow her until this is over. I'll do it on my own dime."

David's jaw twitched. "Yeah, well, you may have to tell that to Tanner."

"I can and I will."

## Chapter Nine

Several weeks passed and Ally made a full recovery. A doctor checked her out while they were in the Cayman Islands and gave her a clean bill of health right before he told her to drop her pants. Then he gave her a shot of Vitamin B12, only because those shots were recommended by the first doctor who checked her out on the yacht. Evidently she had a B12 deficiency and needed to start taking a little better care of herself.

After leaving the physician's office, they walked back to the marina. "I've had time to think about this. You can't get me to bend over for sex so you're going to see to it that every doctor in the world takes a look at my ass so you can peek, too," she teased. "Don't look so surprised. It may have taken a few weeks but I'm on to your game now, big boy."

Santino draped his arm around her shoulders. "Ally, this is going to embarrass you but what can I say, I love to see those cheeks turn pink." He sighed. "Sweetheart, I've seen your ass so many times now that I swear I can tell you where every dimple is located."

She stopped right there. A couple of college-aged men must have heard what he said and they snickered in passing. One of them stretched his neck to check out her tail and Santino looked at him like he could kill him.

"Close your mouth, darling, you're going to catch mosquitoes." He patted her butt with a loving caress and slid an open palm into one of her back pockets. "I ought to spank you for talking like that in public."

"I don't have dimples in my ass," she deadpanned.

"You do, Ally." He temporarily slid his hand from her jeans. He pointed toward a local pub. "Want to check out the band and grab a few drinks."

"Why not? I have the whole evening free."

He winked, pulled out a chair for her and took the chair across from her.

"Back to my butt," she said. "Do you understand what I've done to keep this ass fine-tuned?" She tossed her napkin out of the way rather than in her lap. Yeah, it was safe to say he pissed her off.

"I know what you're *not* doing to keep it in shape," he said, arching a brow.

"Yeah, well, I have to stay off my backside."

"No one said you had to have sex in missionary position. I can bend you over or twist you into any ol' position you like. I promise, we'll manage and we'll get along just fine."

She shot him the cutest smile he'd ever seen and without thinking about it, he reached out and cupped her neck. "Come here."

"No way. You can kiss my dimpled ass if you think that's going to work."

"Fine, I'll get you drunk and this time when you ask me not to take advantage of you, I'm going to claim my hearing aid wasn't turned up loud enough to hear the request."

"Uh-huh. I'd like to see you explain that to—" She stopped herself from saying his name.

Santino didn't press. He motioned for the waitress and ordered a couple of drinks. "Apple martini for the lady and I'll have a scotch and water." He surveyed the nearby tables. He kept his eyes on everyone for a few seconds before he returned his focus to her.

"Checking out the babes?"

"Only one babe here," he replied, scooting his chair around the table about the time the band took the stage. From where they were seated, they had a good view of the boat and the set-up placed them with their backs against a solid wall. The new seating

arrangement also gave Santino the opportunity to steal a kiss. This time, he didn't take no for an answer.

After he pulled away, Ally closed her eyes and sighed like she thoroughly enjoyed his public display of affection. "You know how to work that mouth, don't you?"

"It's not the only thing I maneuver well." He patted her knee and she swatted him away.

"Stop that. I'm wearing tight pants and I can feel those fingers like you were on my bare skin. Besides, every man in this place can tell what you're doing."

"The women can't? I was hoping a few of them would pull you aside and tell you how lucky you were to hold the attention of *your man*." The sentiment fell out there on the table before either of them had the chance to prepare appropriately for what a confession like that meant for them.

Ally started fidgeting and he silently cursed himself a few times before he slammed his palm against the wooden table. "Damn it, I can't help it. I'm not going to sit here and worry if I said the wrong thing or acted in an inappropriate way. I haven't done anything wrong. You are not a married woman." His brow furrowed. "Ally, do you care about me?"

"You know I do."

"Do you have strong feelings for me?" he pressed. "Does your heart beat faster when I'm around, or worse, when I'm not? Do you look forward to our time together?"

She smiled. "When are you not with me?"

He grinned too. "Alright, then answer this. Do you watch me sleep? Do you wonder what it would be like if you and I were together?" He dropped his hand to her leg and his fingers crawled up her inner thigh. When he reached his spot, he cupped his hand under her pussy and she jerked. "Do you wonder what it would be like to fuck me, hold me, and God yeah, Ally, make love to me all night like I believe only you could?"

She gulped.

"Do you, Ally?"

"I wasn't planning on being questioned to death," she said, trying to squirm away from his hand.

He pressed his hand firmly against her crotch. "If you move again, I'll finger fuck you right here and after you come, I'll still sit here and have my drink. Understand?"

"Santino," she hissed. "This is not appropriate. There's a family over there with small children."

He snarled. "They shouldn't have their kids in a bar." Reluctantly, he stopped teasing her. "Answer me, Ally."

"Like I said, I wasn't planning on having this conversation tonight."

"You weren't expecting to hear me refer to myself as 'your' man but that's what I am, Ally, so here we are. We've had two surprises today, eh?"

Ally's small hands cradled her chin. "Santino, I have to ask you something first."

"Ask me anything."

"What did you and Tanner talk about when he came to visit? And why didn't he stay until I woke up?" Ally's feelings were hurt over it. In fact, she had deliberately refused Tanner's phone calls since then and Santino knew she'd resorted to the oldest trick in the book—pouting.

"Can I back up and punt?"

"You don't want to talk about it?"

"It's not that I won't talk about it, it's just that I think there are some things Tanner would prefer to talk about with you by himself."

"Since when do you care about what he wants?"

"I do work for the man." His gaze caught the eye of an Italian guy he knew well. In an instant, he nudged Ally. "We've got company, Ally."

"I saw him here last night when we were sitting out on deck. I think you're paranoid," Ally advised, crossing her leg.

"No," he said, gripping her knee. "I know him. He's one of the best sharpshooters I've ever known."

"Does he work alone?" Ally asked, feeling the adrenaline kicking up a notch.

"Fortunately for us, yes."

"Then let me go over there and see if I can get him to talk to me. If I'm the target, why not become the bait too?"

"Not on your life. He'd have you out of here before I could catch up to him. Stay close," Santino said, slapping some cash on the table. Then, he escorted Ally out, weaving through the crowded streets and hoping to get lost in the layers of tourists. "Keep an eye on him. See if he follows us."

In a matter of minutes, they were back on board and ready to move. Shoving binoculars in one of the crew member's hands, he said, "See the man in the white slacks?"

"Got him," the young crew member informed them.

"Any movement from him, any at all, scream bloody hell and hit the deck."

Santino practically shoved Ally down the spiral steps, hurrying to get her out of danger and below deck. "Good grief, Santino, you're going to scare the boy to death. Let me watch our shooter."

"No way. You're going to sit right here in this cabin." He pulled the drapes and added, "I want you to think about entertainment for tonight."

"You can't be serious."

"Actually I am, but right now, I can't think about doing you dirty. I don't need the added distraction." He ran his hand over his bulge. "Much as I'd like to give you a few ideas for later, I need to stay focused on the job."

"I am the job."

"You offering, Ally?"

"Not yet."

"I like the sound of 'yet'," he told her. "Now, listen carefully. We've stayed long enough in Grand

Cayman. We have to move. Our shooter's name is Carlton Mezerati. He doesn't miss, Ally, and he won't be all that interested in taking you in alive."

"You don't know that he's here for me," she pointed out. About that time, Santino's phone lit up his front pocket. He pressed his finger to his lips. "Don't say a word, Ally. This is my phone, not one of Tanner's lines."

She rolled her eyes. "Lady friend?"

"Not unless you pocket-dialed me, now give me a minute." He hit the speaker phone option. "Talk."

She let out an irritated sigh. She was going to have to teach him everything—including how to answer the phone.

"Santino DeLuca?"

"You've got him. What can I do for you?"

"Do you know who this is?" A thick Italian accent cultivated every syllable. Without a doubt, Santino recognized the caller. Carlton Mezerati.

"I have to admit, I'm surprised to see you here in the Caymans."

"Ah, and I you, my friend. Seems you beat me to the finish this time."

Without missing an opportunity, Santino played along. "So it seems."

"I have a proposition for you. Interested?"

"Perhaps." Santino studied Ally. She made her way to the small dressing table. She stooped down, gripped the flat surface, and kicked away her high heels. She carefully removed her watch and earrings too and he took in the shapely legs of one delicious woman.

"I'll let you cash in on the woman if you'll lead me to her children," Carlton stated flatly, startling Santino who had, for at least a moment, lost sight of his objectives.

Ally's bracelet dropped to the carpet.

"Her children?" Santino never raised his voice.

"There are two of them, twin girls."

"I haven't heard the price."

"It's enough. Much like the prize you'll collect for the woman, only a little sweeter this time because I can earn a quick five million more for their father—dead, of course."

"And you want me to lead you to them?"

Mezerati chuckled. "I believe you're slipping, my friend. From what I've observed, you're going to keep the woman for yourself. I'll make your life easier. She'll come to you without the baggage and reins of toddlers."

"Who wants them?"

"You know I'm not giving up that information."

"I'll pay for it."

"It's not for sale."

Much to Santino's surprise, Ally didn't cry. Instead, her expression hardened. Her eyes glazed over with pure ice and all that was left behind was a hatred so strong and pure, only a mother ready to protect her endangered children would recognize it and relate in every way.

"It's a deal."

Santino read Ally's face when he said the three little words. She didn't flinch and it was then he realized Ally truly trusted him, but was it enough to help them through the days ahead? He hoped so. God, how he hoped so.

"Meet me where you last saw me. Two hours. Be there." Immediately, the call disconnected and just as quickly, Ally started pulling out guns and ammunition.

She fought with gun clips one minute and reloaded a sniper rifle the next. "Ally?"

"Don't say a word," she snapped.

"Ally, you're going to have to trust me here."

She turned around and swung her arm in his direction, clutching a Glock. Tears streamed down her face. "You think I don't trust you?" she screamed. "Do you realize that if I thought for one minute you were going to help a man kidnap my girls that I would

release a round of bullets into your body without one inch of remorse?"

"Put the gun down, Ally." Maybe he overestimated her trust.

Her arm started shaking profusely. "Ally, honey, this is nonsense. What are you doing?"

She eyed the gun. "I don't know!" she wailed, tossing the gun. "Santino, I can't do this." She buried her face in her hands and shook her head. "I can't do any of this by myself anymore."

"Oh honey," he said, pulling her from the floor. "You're not alone in this. I promise you. I'll never leave you alone as long as those hits are out on your life or the lives of your daughters."

She resisted him then, trying her best to wriggle from his embrace.

"Ally, let me hold you." He coddled her like a treasured doll, stroking her back and hair with true tenderness.

"I'm going to kill him," she said softly against his shirt. "You can meet him, but I'm going to kill him."

"And then the next one will come, and the one after him. Soon an army of men will search for them. No, Ally. You have to understand, there's not an open mark on their heads. Only one man is searching for your daughters, and he's one of the best. Our only chance to find out who sent him is to leave him alive and wait. Let's see who contacts him and find out what he knows."

Ally rested her head on his shoulder. "I can't lose them, Santino. I've already missed out on so much."

"I know," he whispered. "Why don't you call Dorsey and let him know what we've discovered. Let me place a few calls and see what I can find out and then I'll meet Mezerati."

"I'll go with you."

"No, what you're going to do is stay right here and guard yourself with as much awareness as you'd protect someone in witness protection." The ache in his gut reminded him it was his job to protect her,

but he couldn't be in two places at once and he was not taking her with him to meet the world's most skilled killer. He framed her face. "Ally, I don't want anything to happen to you."

"I'll call Tanner."

His lips grazed hers. Before she slipped from his arms, *she* pulled *him* closer and in an instant, her tongue greedily parted his lips and she guided them through a kiss that truly changed their mission, his place. She ran her fingers through his hair and clutched to him like a last breath or her only hope.

"Ally..." he said, nuzzling her with his cheek.

"Don't go and get yourself killed," she blurted out. Then, as if the kiss never happened, she turned her back, went to a nearby satchel and pulled out another disposable cell phone and dialed.

Santino clenched his teeth and balled his fists. He was wound up tight like a ticking bomb and he realized there was only one way to solve the problem.

If the kiss Ally gave him burned one degree hotter or lasted maybe a few more seconds, he would've pinned her down on the bed and refused to stop until they were both satisfied. Right now, there wasn't time, but in the near future, he'd make sure they had plenty of time to enjoy each other. And so help him, he was going to fuck her until he made sure she never forgot him, even if she later went back to the very man who hired him. The one and only man she claimed to love.

## Chapter Ten

"Dorsey." He expected to hear Santino on the other end, but his luck often improved when least expected.

"Tanner, there's someone placing a price on the girls." Desperation carried through the phone lines and her shattered voice ripped his heart out.

"I know."

"Didn't you think it was important enough to tell me?" She raised her voice only an octave.

"Ally, everything we find out, we share it with Santino, but this was far too dangerous. The man hired to do the job is there in the Caymans and we can't get a lock on him."

"You wanna a lock on him? I have one. He's meeting Santino in two hours at a little café across from the marina."

"Then you have to get out of there."

"Are you crazy? No way. He's going to that meeting. It's the only way we'll find out who ordered the hit and—"

"Marcel." Tanner gave her the only answer she needed and the only name that made any sense if she stopped and thought about it.

"That's insane. He wouldn't kill Molly and Holly."

"Who said anything about killing them? This guy Mezerati was hired to take us all out and carry Molly and Holly back to Marcel. He's claiming to be their biological father so as you can imagine, it complicates things in our inner circles."

"He's what?"

"Ally, get the hell out of there. Marcel arrived in Grand Cayman a few hours ago and he's probably foaming at the mouth, anticipating Santino's meeting."

"Tanner, I can't keep this up. I can help protect you and the girls. I can. I'm trained for this sort of thing. Bring me in, bring me home to you. Let me prove where my strengths are. I can make this better for all of us."

Tanner stared at the picture he had of her hanging on the far wall of the study. Ally was a good mother. In the photograph he loved most, Ally knelt beside Molly and Holly, hovering over them because a stranger approached them. The stranger, as it turned out, was one of Tanner's men, but at the time the snapshot was taken, Ally didn't know who he was or what he wanted. She looked stunning in the photograph but her eyes were set with dark determination.

Tanner longed to have her there but it was too dangerous. If he and Ally were to establish a suitable home for their girls, they needed to stay in one spot. He didn't want to flee Bermuda like they left their last home, dodging a shower of bullets while hovering over his frightened little girls. They were driven into hiding. At the moment, they were safe and they wouldn't have to relocate unless Ally came home and someone followed her. It was too risky trying to bring Ally home, and no one wanted her there more than he did.

"Ally, listen to me. Marcel is behind this but Mezerati isn't the kind of man who works for one client at a time. He could be there for Marcel and the Colombian cartel. You have to get out of there."

"Hang on, Tanner." He heard her walking somewhere and then a voice in the background. "Do you need to speak to Santino?"

"Put him on." A beat or two later, he added, "And Ally?"

"What?" Her considerable lack of interest in talking to him was beginning to rattle him.

"I love you."

"It would've been easier for both of us if we'd fallen in love with someone else."

Tanner started to say something else but immediately grasped the warning behind her statement. By the time he processed, Santino was on the line.

"What do you have for me, Dorsey?"

"It's time to move. Ally will fill you in but get her out of there." After her cool demeanor paralyzed him, he didn't want to repeat himself.

"I think we need to wait. Let me get to Mezerati."

"Marcel Fernandez is there. He hired your guy. Get her out of there and do it now."

"You got it."

"DeLuca?"

"Yeah?"

"Is everything comfortable enough for you and Ally?"

How did a man ask another man if he was sleeping with his woman? How did he find out if the woman he was risking everything for was more of a sexual creature than he gave her credit for or still a love-struck teenager stuck in the past, reveling in the idea of a forever love only they shared. He didn't know how to do it and typically he wasn't a man who pussy-footed around, especially when it came to Ally.

"Dorsey, something on your mind?"

"As a matter of fact, there is."

"Then speak it. I don't have all day."

"Are you fucking her?" Sometimes the direct approach worked.

"No."

He sighed. *Thank God.*

"But I will be."

Tanner could almost hear the mockery in his voice. He understood too. What kind of man didn't protect his family but instead left another one to do the job for him?

"I have to hand it to you, DeLuca, you shoot straight from the hip, huh?"

"Well, since you asked, yeah—and in more ways than one." He chuckled.

"Does Ally know what your intentions are?"

"I'd say she has some idea." His voice deliberately trailed off and Tanner could almost imagine Ally nearby, close enough to see the lingering gaze of a man filled with lust, hot desire, uncontrollable needs, and a hunger only she could sate.

"You know the history I have with her?"

"Yes, it's the only reason you've held onto her because it's not been the way you take care of her, if you know what I mean."

"Santino, better men have tried and failed with Ally."

"I'm not going to fail when the time is right, Dorsey," Santino assured him. "Ally wants to talk to you. I have to round up our crew. Watch our back. I'm doing what I can here but we can't have late information reaching us. We should've been notified the second you knew Marcel arrived here."

Ally was back on the phone in another second. "Tanner?"

"Yeah?" He clutched the phone with both hands, wishing they could talk for hours.

"I love you."

There was a 'but' in there.

"Ally, you do what you have to do. When we're together again, we'll make things right. We always make things right, don't we?"

"We try."

"Do you love him?" The question came from out of nowhere. He didn't mean to ask but after David returned with news of how cozy they were, what was he supposed to do?

"I have to go."

The line immediately died and the conversation ended. Maybe some things were better left unsaid, especially between a man and a woman separated by several hundred miles and a lifetime of bad decisions,

never mind a newly formed relationship, one Tanner feared was just as strong as what he and Ally once shared.

\* \* \* \*

"He asked you about your feelings for me." It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"And you avoided giving him a direct answer?"

He probably expected a reply for that one. "Have we reached cruising speed yet?"

"And you think you're going to do the same here with me?"

Ally nervously studied her hands, rotating her thumbs back and forth.

"Ally? I'm not going anywhere. You'll give me an answer or else I'll fuck it out of you." He shut the master stateroom door and locked it. "I'm going to do *that* anyway. I won't have a problem being there a little longer. I'll stay between your legs until I'm embedded inside your head."

Ally shivered and her mouth watered. God help her, he made her thirsty. He looked at her like she was not only the only woman in the world, but she was already *his* woman.

"I belong to Tanner in all the ways that matter, Santino. No one can take his place, not in life or in death." She felt the need to let him know death wouldn't change her feelings for the *first* man she ever loved, given Santino's career choice.

He stalked her, slowly unbuttoning his shirt. He slid his arms out of the long sleeves, and then sat on the edge of the bed. Leaning back, he braced himself with muscular forearms while crossing his left leg over the right.

Her gaze went on tour. She started at the top of his head and noticed the natural damp curl hanging over his dark furrowed brow. His hooded eyes followed hers. She took a scenic road trip, traveling down his neck, across the broad stretch of shoulders, dipping down and around the flat discs on his chest

and then following the curvaceous ripples of rock hard abs.

Santino's delicious tongue settled in the corner of his mouth. "Let me know when you're finished."

Good grief, his confidence made her crazy. Not only was he cocky, but he possessed a smooth dominance, an alluring way to pursue a woman without being the pursuer. In his presence Ally felt like a huntress, a woman scrutinizing her prey.

"I've never belonged to anyone else. I'm Tanner Dorsey's woman," she confessed, meeting his gaze again. If her eyes darted any lower she'd have drool on her chin.

"Soon you'll feel the same way about me, if you don't already."

Ally felt fully exposed in her pinstripe pastel pajamas. Barely protected by a low-cut camisole top, she was aware of his intense focus on her breasts. She gnawed nervously on her bottom lip, watching him in pure wonder and anticipating the full pursuit of a carnal man with needs he wouldn't hesitate to express.

She realized then she put her faith in Santino, but she was terrified of him, paralyzed by what she felt whenever they were together. He spooked her for many legitimate reasons. He had rapidly become her weakness; the man who had the power to take her away from her family, or in fact, carry her home to them.

Santino DeLuca was the first man Ally profiled as a new agent. She understood how dangerous he was but she found him impossible to resist regardless of the knowledge. He'd gone out of his way to protect her and take care of her. He'd been there—not Tanner or her brothers—but Santino DeLuca, a hired gun, a trained killer, a man who was all these things and so much more.

Ally rushed the door. She had to get out of there. She loved Tanner and she already had so many

feelings for Santino. Sleeping with him would only make things worse. "This can't happen."

"It already is." He hopped off the bed, caught her around the waist and slammed her to the mattress, shoving her arms high above her head and towering over her like an animalistic beast recently unleashed. "Don't fight me, Ally. You want this as much as I do." His lips crashed against hers and in a life-changing moment, she forgot everything—her life with Tanner, her past, and her future.

The only thing that mattered right then was Santino. All she wanted was time alone with him. All she desired was everything he was willing to give, and she didn't think she'd ever wanted anything quite as much as she longed for Santino right then.

\* \* \* \*

Their lips came together like a force stronger than nature. They held one another hostage, captured by desires greater than either of them.

Their meeting of mouths was more than just a good kiss, it was soul-healing, a true religious experience, and understandably addictive. A seductively capable kiss broke all barriers she'd placed in front of them.

Santino stripped her of her clothes and along the way, lost his in the process. She barely noticed. His lips never left hers while his fingers wandered.

By the time she realized they were completely nude, his thick shaft pressed against her hip and he wore a wicked smile plastered upon his lips. "Ally, touch me. I want to feel you all around me."

She didn't have a problem with the sex part. Her body responded to his in a way she fully expected which was one of the reasons she'd been so petrified of him. They had chemistry, a strong connection they formed almost from the start.

No, sex wasn't the issue. She had a problem with betrayal.

Tanner practically gave his consent. He hired Santino. He should've signed a permission form and

secured the notice around Santino's neck when he sent him to protect her. And guard he would, without question. He'd proven himself capable in many ways. Now, he was ready to expose the rest, show her the man she'd been missing.

She was certain Tanner accepted what was happening there. He must have anticipated their mutual attraction from the start. How had he known she'd find Santino so appealing and if he suspected from the beginning, why did he put them in that situation? Was this Tanner's way of testing her love?

There kiss broke and she whimpered. "Santino."

"I'm right here," he assured her, kissing her cheek and beginning a slow descent south. Circling her nipple with his tongue, he flashed an award-winning smile, a grin that insinuated he declared himself the winner of a previously unattainable prize. "I've wanted you like this since the day I met you."

If she had any self-control at all, she'd beg him to stop but her body already had other ideas. She prepared for his tongue. Her trembling legs parted and her hips rolled forward.

She rushed him, placing her hand at his nape and guiding him lower. She needed him to hurry. If the lust burned any hotter, she'd need urgent care, emergency attention.

His firm hands gripped her sides and he licked her stomach, tracing his way around a tiny mole located right above her panty line. Dear God, why did he find it necessary to linger at her stomach?

Santino nurtured her desires. His tongue flickered across her middle in an unusual pattern. Seconds later, he positioned himself between her legs and lowered his head.

She'd dreamed of oral sex with Santino since their first brief encounter. At first, she'd felt some level of shame. She was Tanner's woman. She didn't fool around with anyone, especially a stranger, a killer hired by the very man she loved.

Things changed and several weeks passed. They were two different people now and becoming lovers was acceptable and obviously expected. Given the time Ally and Santino spent together, they were practically a couple.

His fingers danced around her opening. He studied her vagina like he was curiously examining her. A guttural sound fell upon her skin. "Such a pretty pussy," he whispered, licking the folds.

She pressed her head against the pillow and waited for the pleasure to wash over her. *This* felt oh so right.

The anticipated oral pampering didn't come. Once more, Santino towered over her. He further delayed the start of something beautiful *and real*.

Observing Santino, that's when it really hit her. Tanner had always been like a dream, a young girl's fantasy. Santino had been there with her, right beside her. She could reach out and touch him, and best of all, he made her feel like a woman, a sensual and sexy, full-blown woman.

His lips feathered across hers and he gave her a loaded lopsided smile. "I want your eyes open and on me. When they aren't on me, stare at the mirrors and supervise." He wagged his brows. "See everything, Ally, let yourself go. Experience how it feels to be a pampered woman."

She clung to him. Wrapping her arms around him, she fought to get closer, struggled to become his second skin, and was dying to consume every part of him—his lips and body, and his every single thought.

The husky way he spoke to her made her into one greedy and passionate lover. Without a doubt, she *felt*. Lord have mercy, she endured something so powerful that she didn't know how to describe the emotions.

He kissed her again. His lips abducted hers and she surrendered to the awaiting adventure. Who knew kissing could be downright naughty and purely erotic?

Ally searched her heart one last time for guilt, for anything to show her this was a wrong move to make. There wasn't any disgrace. Regrets wouldn't lie beneath the surface, waiting. Remorse didn't exist because her better judgment was clouded by an emotion so strong, a feeling so incredible that it could only be characterized by one four-letter word. One she refused to say, or think.

He advanced again. This time, once he found his place, he cupped her bottom and lifted her. His mouth hovered over her vagina. Two fingertips massaged the opening.

"Watch, Ally," he said, turning on his side so she could play too.

His thick cock pressed against the back of her hand. She touched him, took him in her palm and stroked from base to tip. The pre-excitement dripped over her fingers, a glistening sign of things to come.

Ally released him. Bringing her fingers to her mouth, she sucked her three middle fingers clear down to the joint. She had been eager to taste him and she was still hungry to devour him.

"Now, that's fuckin' sexy," he rasped.

As if to reward her, his fingers parted her opening and with a more deliberate urgency, he fingered her. He came to his knees, gripped her hip and plunged inside her folds.

"Don't stop," she ordered. "Harder." She was coming apart.

An attentive lover, Santino's lips slanted over her nipple, lapping around the point with a flair for calculated enticement. Her sex clenched. Her womb trembled. He was too attentive and so damn good.

He wasn't just spoiling her. He was ruining her.

His fingers tormented her. He was never quick enough to draw an orgasm and he didn't go deep enough to shatter her senses. He knew how to please a woman and he took her right to the edge of fulfillment over and over again. "That's it, baby, wait for me. Let me make you burn."

Santino held her open and leaned forward. She arched, fully expecting penetration. He leaned over and licked her nipple for show. His mouth swept over her belly and this time he didn't pause.

He was a man in search of a blazing fire, and he knew where to find the hottest of female flames. He whispered against her opening, teasing her. "Ah Ally, you're so wet, aren't you, sugar?"

Her hand fell to the top of his head. "Please, Santino. Don't tease me."

Santino lowered his mouth to her pussy lips, tonguing his way inside her slick passage. He moaned against her body as he pleased her with one lick after another, holding her thighs apart with a firm grip, maintaining solid control.

"Hmmm, baby, you taste so sweet and pure."

His chin was her anchor. She ground against him, pulling his hair. Her body groveled for a satisfying conclusion and she was anxious for the orgasm. Right when she got there, a second way, from taking the free-fall, he backed away, leaving her pumping her hips at thin air.

He uncurled the fingers clinging to his hair and stared at her through wild eyes. "Easy, sweetheart." The damp reminder of where he'd been lingered on his chin and lips. "You're only taking it one way."

*Smart man.*

He tweaked her nipple, rolling the point between his fingers. "You have the prettiest little diamonds right here." He sucked her between his lips and held himself at her opening.

"Santino?"

"It's too late for a no, Ally. You don't get that option now." His eyes flickered with defiance.

"I'm not changing my mind, but—"

"I've gotcha, Ally," he said, probably realizing his stocky cock was more than the average man sported in the bedroom.

She swallowed. "I trust you."

"And you should," he promised. Framing her face, he lowered his forehead to hers. "I'm only going to hurt you in all the right places." Staring into her eyes, Santino inched in and found his spot. He took her nice and slow, stretching her so she could accommodate him.

Her mouth went dry. She lost her ability to speak or even moan.

"Holy hell, woman, you're like sweet satin and fine lace."

He showered her breasts with continual appreciation. Leaving them unattended on a whim, he drew her forward. Her breasts mashed against his chest and he robbed her of another mind-stealing kiss, stuffing himself inside her pussy and then stilling against her, giving her another moment to prepare for the rest.

"That's it," he spoke through the kiss. "Wrap your legs around me, baby."

"I...can't," she finally managed. "You're hurting me. You're ripping me apart."

He pursed his lips and withdrew a little. "Give me a minute. Get used to me. You have a little more room in the pussy compartment than you realize."

She gasped. That sounded like something Tanner would say! "Santino, this may not work."

"Like hell," he bit out, staring to move. "You're tougher than that." His patience ran thin and she saw it in his eyes before his thighs bunched. He secured his bottom lip under his top teeth and all bets were off. He was ready for more than an inch by inch intrusion. He screwed himself inside her.

"Sweet hell, you're killing me!" she exclaimed, but she matched his moves, realizing the more he gave, the less it hurt. In spite of his size, she threw herself into the passion, realizing her undulating body inspired quicker thrusts and a faster pace.

Santino's steely length brought about intense burning sensations but when the pain turned to

pleasure, she realized something damning. Santino DeLuca was an unmatched lover.

He shoved her knees forward maneuvering inside her until she was relishing every hard thrust. He fell against the bed and brought her over him. She straddled him and he went deeper, stretching her muscles, branding her as his.

Her pussy moved up and down his shaft. He pulled her forward and clamped down on a nipple, teasing the point with his lips while she rotated her hips. She rode him hard, fucked him wild, and oh how she cried out against his skin, rocked with his moves.

"Damn me to hell and back, and I still wouldn't miss this for the world!"

Her thighs opened and closed against his hips. He held onto her torso and thrust inside her. "That's it, let me feel that sweet pussy. Let me have you, Ally. All of you, I need everything you have to give."

Her nails scraped down his chest. Delicious as it was, his size still threatened to stretch her more. He hammered inside her. His thick dick stretched her, demanding space, commanding room.

"It's not supposed to hurt!" she exclaimed, dropping her head back over her shoulders. "Santino, good God, this isn't supposed to feel this right!"

Her cries encouraged him more. He bracketed his arm around her back and switched positions again, taking the top spot. He placed his palm against her forehead, brushing her bangs out of the way.

He looked into her eyes with a lingering purpose. "Ally..." Two strokes came, then three more. A shattered breath and a broken cry later, he finished by asking her, "What's so wrong about this? What is it that hurts, baby?" He pounded inside her, harder and stronger, clasping her hands and pushing them above her head, focusing on her breasts.

Ally closed her eyes. "Don't talk right now. Just fuck me."

Her feet were flat against the mattress. She used them to propel her forward, anchor herself in a

position of strength, in a way where she could easier handle him measure for measure, working her legs in a butterfly's fashion, accepting his cock's punches and he gave more than a man's share of a few.

His pace, the one he'd controlled so well, suddenly changed. "Come for me, Ally. Let me see you take pleasure in me, in us."

He rose to his knees and held her legs apart, fucking her like a champ. If any man looked like a sex machine then, Santino DeLuca owned and developed the patent. His six-pack abs, hard thighs and long cock were more than she could take as a lover but when she looked into the mirrors over the bed and watched him enter her, she was hooked.

"Good damn, woman, this little pussy is so pretty and tight." He watched their bodies connect and then screamed out, "Now!"

"Santino, oh Santino," she purred, hardly recognizing her own voice, her complete satisfaction. "So good, Santino, oh it's so damned good."

His cock surged through her walls. He tore through barriers any other man might have left untouched. He fucked her with an uncontrollable gait, a burst of semen filling her pussy and drenching her with the best a man could give. "That's it, ah baby, this is so fucking *it*."

She pulled on his arms. She needed to hold him but he didn't stop. He never slowed and in the end the passion set her free.

Ally wanted more anyway. She longed for the raw man, the freedom to explore sex and emotions, lust and desires and everything else lingering between them.

They weren't just about the sex. There was so much more between them.

Another orgasm followed her. One chased her into another. "Santino!"

He locked his gaze on their connecting bodies and finished making love to her with timed thrusts and calculated strokes. She shook violently in his arms

accepting the most sensual orgasms she'd ever experienced. And when they were spent, he didn't collapse against her. Instead, he slipped away from her and from their bed.

Then he yanked his pants from the floor and deserted her.

## Chapter Eleven

He left her. He had to get away from her and he abandoned her, all because he was running scared.

If there were questions before, none existed now. Santino loved her. He loved a woman who belonged to another man and when the job was over, he'd love her still.

He stood at the bow of the boat cursing at the wind. Why crook a finger at himself when the universe carried the blame. Situations, circumstances, and the reason he was exactly the kind of man Ally didn't need, haunted him.

None of that mattered. Ally changed him and she made a difference in his life long before he took her to bed. Truth be told, she owned him at 'who the hell are you' and it went downhill from there. He was drowning in the idea of her and the love he found in her arms was just the kind that could get them both killed.

He kicked the glossy hardwood footrest and gripped the solid railing until his knuckles turned white. "Tanner Dorsey's woman," he whispered to the night, not expecting an audience.

He heard her light footsteps before she said, "I don't know how to love anyone else."

He wheeled around and glared at her, through her, actually. Was she insinuating he *needed* her love?

He pushed by her with a diabolical chuckle hanging in his lungs. Before he passed her, his shield was in place. "I didn't ask for it, sweets," he hissed.

"No, you didn't, but I think I should tell you anyway. I'm a woman with just as many needs as a man. I resisted the urge whenever I had one because I didn't want to find a temporary Tanner-replacement. That's not fair to anyone, so I didn't pursue you. I

also figured I owed it to Tanner to keep what we had, sacred."

She released a sarcastic laugh and he jerked when he heard her. What was wrong with her? Was she going to snap right in front of him?

"I know it's ridiculous, considering his past, but it was something I chose to do for me, for us. See, Tanner has been a part of my life since I was a little girl. He's my family as much as Molly and Holly and now—"

"Who the hell do you think you fucked, lady? A pussy-whipped man like Tanner Dorsey? Think again. It's not happening here. I have a job to do, and I'm doing it." He cut her off deliberately and if she were smart, she'd take the escape route he gave her. He wasn't asking her for anything. He expected nothing in return. If he loved her, and he did, then he could love her from afar.

"So tell me something then, Mr. DeLuca." Her voice dripped icy sarcasm. "Do you screw around on every job, hmmm? I mean, after all, I'm sure you find yourself with any number of beautiful women. You're flown from one exotic location to another.

"I wonder, do you ever fuck a woman right before you slice her throat?" Concealed contempt controlled her voice. "You seem to have no problem seducing a woman. It's just the after-sex that makes you nervous, right? Seems like a target would be the best lay. You can kill two birds with one slug, huh?"

"Shut up, Ally."

She stormed across the deck and stood in front of him with her balled fists hanging at her sides. He was surprised she didn't practice her left hook.

"Don't you dare tell me to shut up. I'm not some whore you'll leave at the end of this job with a life pension and a few dozen roses!" She glared at him hard and then the hurt broke through and earned her more leverage than she probably wanted.

With a wicked laugh, she doubled over. "Oh, you should see your face." She pointed at him like a

lunatic, something he truly didn't want to see in her now, of all times. "You didn't think I knew about that, huh? Yeah Santino, I do. I know more about you than you'll ever be told that I know."

He raked his fingers across his dry lips. Her scent still filled his senses.

He could use a drink.

Ally knew far too much about him and for some reason, it never dawned on him until now. She had worked on a lot of cases for the FBI and she never discussed them with him. Had he once been a file on her desk? Had she profiled him, followed his every move, talked to some of the women he'd left behind in his past?

He shook his head in denial. "You need to get some rest."

"You need to come to bed, too," she whispered before he left her alone on the upper deck.

He heard her words, felt relieved, in a sense, that she wanted him to hold her but he resisted the urge to fall victim to Ally Stephens. She'd withheld information, failed to admit she knew more about him than most, and that was a breach of trust.

He stomped down the spiral steps toward the master stateroom and into the bathroom, where he stripped and then stepped into the shower. "Damn you, Ally." He looked down at his hard-on and craved her all over again. *She's going to get us both killed.* He'd already warned himself, but his clever cock still had other ideas.

He grabbed the soap and spread a thick lather over his chest and belly, still staring at the dick refusing to stand down. He had a feeling as long as Ally occupied his mind, he would have this little problem.

No, he was going to get them both killed. That's what he was going to do. All because he couldn't shake how she made him feel, how she looked into his eyes with a deep rooted burning desire. She shook his

senses, fueled his fears, and damn it to hell, he loved her!

In the distance, Santino heard a speedboat. Shots were fired and the sound of ricocheting bullets meeting metal alerted potential followers of the dangers straight ahead.

The bar of soap dropped from Santino's hand and he sprinted from the shower. The sound of spraying water vibrated in the distance and his heart slammed against his chest.

"Ally!" He snatched his pants and jumped into them, grabbing the open duffel bag Ally had been searching through earlier. He plucked another one from the closet, already packed with his belongings. He bumped into Rios and a few other crew members when he rounded the last corner on the stairwell.

"They have your woman! Hurry!" Rios was a chef by trade, but an excellent marksman, which was the only reason he'd earned his position on Santino's staff. Rios was the only other person on the boat who really understood the reason they were all wandering around on the open sea without a particular destination.

Tossing his bags onto the small boat below them, Santino jumped over a few water skis, cursed and then called out over his shoulder. "Which way?"

Rios pointed and gave them a final shove away from the yacht. Santino yelled to his crew. "Head back to Grand Cayman, we'll meet there!"

As soon as the boat sped into the darkness, Santino switched gears. Rios took the wheel and Santino searched through Ally's bag. Dorsey was going to kill him. Hell, *fuck* Dorsey, he was going to kill himself with his own hands if anything happened to Ally.

He pulled one gun, and then another from her bag. In the very bottom of the bag, boxes of ammunition and a large zip-up pouch with a few more personal items. "Damn." He swallowed hard as Rios

watched him, a smirk replacing the man's worried expression. "Are those toys for you or Dorsey?"

At a time like this, Santino didn't need to think about why Ally had these things. She seemed so innocent, so fragile, and damned near pure, yet the playthings in the bag suggested otherwise, even though the toys were still in their appropriate boxes.

He was going to spank her ass hard for making him think about sex when he needed to concentrate on saving her life. He shoved her vibrator, handcuffs, lubes, rings, and creams back into the pouch.

"How much of a lead do they have?" Santino shouted over the hum of the motor.

"Ten minutes, maybe more."

The XSR48 was unbeatable with massive speed but with the GPS system and the other techno gadgets to ensure this speedboat was the best on the ocean, Ally was only a few minutes away. Santino pointed, "There. Did you see that flash of light?"

"Got it!" Rios exclaimed. "A private island is up ahead. That's where they're taking her. There are a few makeshift cabanas on the south side of the island."

"Kill the engine. We'll sit and wait." Santino hoped they made it in plenty of time.

"Mr. DeLuca?"

"Kill the fuckin' engine."

Rios did as he was told and then faced him. "They took her in what she was wearing, which was very little."

"Damn it, I understand that better than anyone. I'm the reason she didn't have her clothes in the first place." He wished he hadn't shared that tidbit. If he hadn't, maybe Rios would've assumed she had a thing for skinny dipping or something.

Santino quickly dressed in the garb he had in his bag. His camouflage pants and shirt looked like something the military would use when they wanted to go undetected in a war zone. He packed himself down with weaponry next. Guns, knives, hand

grenades; everything a man like Santino DeLuca used to save those he was hired to protect, the one woman he failed to guard when she needed him most.

He clutched a Glock and glared at his watch. They didn't have a lot of time. The Colombians would have someone close, transporters throughout the Caribbean, standing by on alert so that when Ally was captured, she could be handed off without delays and unnecessary complications.

His heart sank. If an exchange was made, it would be impossible to get her back without a battle, one far bigger than one man, or even two could manage.

"Did you call the boss?"

"Hell no."

"You should, he'll be alerted because of the tracking on this boat."

"I'm not reporting to him until I have her back."

"If we get her back," Rios said.

"There's no room for mistakes, understand?"

Rios nodded.

"Let's float," Santino said.

The two men propelled toward shore. They needed to approach as quietly as possible because once they reached land, all hell would break loose.

\* \* \* \*

"It's been a long time, Ally." Marcel examined her with hate-filled eyes. "I understand Dorsey didn't take care of you like you'd planned."

She thinned her lips and struggled to free herself. Her captors tightened their grips around her forearms, holding her in place for Marcel's perusal.

He touched her cheek with a hard hand, smoothing the flesh over her cheekbone. She flinched, realizing the strike would come long before he knocked the ever lovin' hell out of her.

Slapping her to the ground, Marcel nudged her with his foot. She swallowed hard, closed her eyes and prayed for Santino's speedy arrival. She knew he was out there. She felt him there. He was waiting to strike. She trusted in that.

Maybe she was delusional to expect him. Most in his field considered him a traitor, someone who would kill a man if he was the job for which he'd been hired and then turn the same gun on the very employer who'd paid him the year before, if the price was right.

Ally still trusted him to save *her*. He was her only chance, her last hope.

The lanterns in the bamboo cabana provided lingering shadows in the thatch ceiling overhead. Marcel delivered another swift kick to her midsection. Ally rolled to her side and groaned out her intense pain.

"I've been anticipating this day, Ally. I've waited to bring you to your knees about as long as I once waited to see you on your back."

The hut hummed with the masculine sounds of approval. Crude remarks followed by hearty chuckles filled the small hut.

He delivered another kick and then another. She screamed out, trying to protect her ribcage, wrapping her middle with her arms, hoping Santino saved her in time.

"Tell me something, Ally." Marcel squatted next to her. "Did you fuck Steve while you were on the run? Hmm?"

Marcel had known all along Steve had been helping her. How many innocent people would suffer because of her and her relationship with Tanner?

"Answer me, sugar sweets." Marcel inched closer, his scotch-ridden breath against her ear. "Did you let him have a taste?"

She wanted to hurl when his fingers lifted the tarp in which she'd been carried. She felt his cold hand against her skin.

Ally refused to look at him. He fondled her, stroking the same places Santino's lips had kissed hours earlier. He rubbed her stomach and then pinched her nipple. At the same time, a loud explosion ignited behind the temporary hut.

Marcel's head snapped toward the small gate where a door must've once been. "We have company and he's earlier than expected."

"Gentleman, shoot to kill. Kill DeLuca and you'll earn a million dollar bonus on the spot."

"You'll never get him," Ally moaned, trying to sit.

Marcel grabbed a handful of hair and yanked her head back. "You'd better hope and pray we do because while I wanted to hand you over alive, I'll be okay with handing the Colombians a corpse, too. So we're clear, I'm talking about yours and then Dorsey's. Wanna know who'll raise *our girls* then?" He sneered. "I can only hope that after they turn eighteen, they'll resemble *mommy*."

She struggled to breathe. "I wouldn't plan for the future just yet if I were you, Marcel."

"Get out there!" Marcel barked his orders. Then, he gained her full attention by pulling her ear until her head tilted sideways. "Piss me off one more time, Ally and I'll let you swallow a bullet. You may have had some good practice sipping blanks but when I pull the trigger on this gun, all the throat reflexes in the world won't save you." He pinched her cheek and added, "Now be a good little bought whore and go wait in the corner."

Another explosion lit up the sky and this time, it was in front of the cabana. Ally caught a glimpse of Santino. He walked through a rainbow of flames unleashing pure hell on five men in front of the open hut. A spray of bullets represented a battle already won.

Santino was pissed *and* confident. No one would be able to defeat him. Santino was there and he would save her.

Ally tried to recall how many men she saw when she was captured. She remembered Marcel and a few others, but how many? Damn it, what was wrong with her! She didn't know, and couldn't be sure.

Marcel grabbed her. The plastic material in which she'd been wrapped fell away from her body. Fully exposed, Ally fought him, understanding what Marcel planned to do and fearing the worst if Santino really cared for her. The only chance they had of bringing Santino down was to test whether or not he had feelings for her and if he did—and she knew the answer to that—Marcel might get the upper hand.

Marcel pulled her outside kicking and screaming. He was too strong for her and after the beating she'd endured, she didn't have the strength to fight him. He squeezed her breast and held her against his side, a gun firmly placed at her temple.

"DeLuca!"

Ally squirmed, trying to see through the smoke and flames. The area didn't have trees or bushes to hide behind, leaving Santino and Marcel at a disadvantage. At least Mother Nature didn't choose sides.

Another explosion allowed Santino the needed opportunity to sneak up behind them. With a knife at Marcel's throat, he hissed his order, "Let her go or I'll slice your throat."

At the same time he threatened Marcel, Ally reached behind Santino's back, going for a gun she'd undoubtedly find in Santino's waistband. She retrieved the revolver and let the weapon hang at her side. As if Marcel understood death had him surrounded, he released her, careful to keep his pistol aimed at her head.

She moved in front of him. Her chest rose and fell. She doubled over, remembering the agonizing pain Marcel deliberately inflicted when he kicked her.

"That's better," Santino remarked, eying Ally. He applied pressure to the blade and made another easy demand, "Drop the gun, too."

Marcel's gaze settled on Ally's breasts. "Do I look like a fool?"

Santino's warning came in the form of a twitch in his upper cheek and a sudden shift when he focused

on something behind her. Ally dropped, rolled, and fired two shots into one of Marcel's men. She whirled around just in time to see Marcel's body fall to the ground.

"Yeah, Marcel, you look like a foolish man indeed." Santino didn't look at the body and he didn't check for a pulse. The job was done. He took off his shirt and wrapped it around Ally. "Let's get out of here."

They ran for the water. They weren't out of danger yet and the cartel had someone headed their way. They needed luck on their side now, luck and a whole lot of gun power on the chance they'd meet their enemy on the open seas.

"Rios?" Santino jumped on the boat and expected to find his sidekick ready to move. "Rios?" He touched the man on the shoulder and his head rolled, showcasing the neat slit straight across his neck. Feeling for a pulse, he glanced at Ally and shook his head.

Ally gasped and turned her head. Her life was upside down. Innocent people were dying while thugs from around the globe tried to kill her. When would it all end?

Santino tossed Rios over his shoulder. He walked off the boat and placed Rios's body in the sand.

"You can't leave him here," Ally said.

"We don't have another choice. I can't pull into a marina with a corpse, Ally."

"The man has a family, people who love him."

"And I'll send someone for his body but right now, I have to get you off this ocean and someplace safe."

"We're not going back to the boat?" she questioned.

"No." He started the boat and sped off into the darkness.

Ally didn't question him again.

A few minutes into the trip, Santino pointed to a storage compartment. She retrieved her bag. She

thought she heard him groan when she bent over. Her bare ass flashed him so anything was possible.

Once she retrieved her guns and reloaded his, her focus returned to the water. With two guns in the seat next to her, two at her feet and one in her hand, Ally was ready for anything, except maybe Santino DeLuca.

## Chapter Twelve

A few hours later, Santino unlocked their unit at a luxurious townhouse resort in Little Cayman. Ally walked inside, taking one step at a time, overly-cautious after what happened the last time they tried to use a safe house. Santino couldn't blame her.

"Do you know the owner?"

"Yes," he said.

"And you're sure we're safe here?"

"This is the safest place on the planet right now."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me."

"I do trust you."

And the fact that she did drove him crazy.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Not so much. Blood on my hands tends to ruin my appetite."

"Big bad agent like yourself, you're kidding, right?"

"No, I didn't join the right side of the law because I wanted to kill the bad guys."

"It was self-defense, nothing more."

"What about you? Do you only kill in self-defense?"

"You know the answer to that, Ally."

She glanced around at their new space and he took it as a cue. "Come on, let me show you where you'll find everything you need." He didn't offer her his hand but he squeezed her shoulder when he passed. It was enough to revisit too many memories and those were the things he wanted to run away from now. He didn't need to think about touching her in a way that made him positively insane. His job was to protect her. He failed her because he'd gotten too close.

He walked upstairs and pointed down the hall. "There are three bedrooms, three baths, and a utility closet with a washer and dryer."

She looked down at the long shirt covering her and giggled. "Guess I'll have a lot of laundry to do, huh?"

"You'll have to settle for wearing T-shirts and pants that are way too big for you." He winced at the latter. Did she need pants? Yeah, he reminded himself, she would. His goal was to keep her alive. "My room is there at the end of the hall. You can have your choice from the other two."

"This is your place?"

He nodded. "No one has ever found me here and it's vacant ninety-nine percent of the time. I can keep you alive here, Ally."

"But..."

"But we're not contacting Tanner again until this over."

"Is that for your benefit or mine?" she snapped.

"I asked myself the same question a thousand times when I made my mind up to bring you here."

"And..."

"It's for your benefit, Ally. I'll have someone checking in on the situation with Tanner and your girls. If your girls face a new danger, I'll let you know, but from what I understand, Marcel made the situation worse with Tanner's enemies. With Marcel out of the way, things should improve in a month or two."

"A month or two?"

"Yes."

"I see." Ally's eyes flickered with recognition. "And we're hiding here for a month or two?"

"Maybe longer, I don't know."

Ally followed him back downstairs. "There are two pools on the property, a private beach, and of course, a Jacuzzi tub you're welcome to use in my bathroom."

"And a bedroom for me to claim?"

"Ally..."

"We're not going to talk about what happened between us?"

"No, we're not."

"I see."

"Ally, when this is over, you're going back to him and I can't keep you safe if." She didn't interrupt him and his voice didn't trail. He just stopped talking.

"If you're in love with me?"

"I never said that."

"You didn't have to say anything. The look on your face when you saw me in front of that demolished hut told me everything I needed to know."

"We'll talk about this later. Right now, I have to make arrangements for groceries." He needed to get some booze in the place so he could drink, sleep, and ignore the hell out of one sexy as hell woman.

"Go get your damned groceries. Can I at least get a change of clothes and take a shower?" she asked, walking upstairs.

"Here, I'll show you where everything is." He tried to pass her but she wouldn't move. The little siren realized what she was doing. Her ass cheeks were right there in front of him and her bottom was bare. When she reached the top step, she tripped and God help him, it was the most delicious and intentional ploy he'd ever witnessed.

He caught her hips. Her hair fell in her face and through her long, stringy hair, she shot him a devilish grin.

Reluctantly, he gripped her sides, squeezed, and then pulled the shirt over her hips again. They stared at one another for the most intense moment he had recorded to memory.

"I'm not backing down, Santino. I'm facing my feelings and so are you."

His chest was in knots. "Ally, I can't do this right now. I'd hurt you," he said, tracing her jaw and moving his finger across her swollen lip.

"Then hurt me. Bend me over and strip me of everything I have left." She stroked the swell of his cheek. "But don't make me sleep in a strange place without you next to me and don't you dare deny what you feel for me." Her mouth slanted over his and she kissed him, probably without realizing her aggression would bring out another side of him entirely, a dark side he wasn't sure he could handle, much less expect her to want.

"Ally," he whispered, rubbing his beard against her hand.

"Santino, no," she said, locking her fingers at his belt. "I'm a grown woman. I know what I'm doing."

He swallowed hard. A time would soon come when he wouldn't have this opportunity but right then, he did. A quick image of what she'd just been through flashed in front of his face.

He'd almost lost her.

Remembering how he felt—heartbroken and physically ill—when he realized she'd been grabbed by men with a plan to kill her, Santino picked her up and cradled her against his body. The contact was too much. He clutched her form to his chest and breathed her in, cloaking her body with his.

He entered the master bedroom and carried her to expansive bathroom where he placed her, ever so gently, on the tile-covered countertop. Before he left her there, she seized another sweet moment. Holding onto his shoulders, she pressed her tongue through the seam of his lips and delivered a ravenous kiss. Her hot little mouth made him reckless.

Santino bunched her hair at her nape and stared into her beautiful face. "Ally, please give us a little time. I don't know if I can handle this."

"No," she deadpanned, unhooking his belt and forcing his zipper to give.

He backed away from her, cursing his himself and ridiculing his cock for being so defiant. He turned on the shower, fully aware of her movements behind him.

He closed his eyes. She was his weakness. She was a man's undoing and stronger men—Tanner Dorsey, for instance—had been unable to resist her. How did he expect to be any different?

When he turned around, she was waiting for him. Completely nude, Ally crooked her finger back and forth.

To tear his gaze away from her wasn't an option. He plucked the guns from his waistband, unhooked the straps concealing three knives, kicked off his shoes and stripped in record time.

"Dear God woman, there's no way around this is there?" He stopped right there. Without a fraction of a second to spare, he saved himself from telling her exactly how much he cared for her, but just because he didn't express himself, didn't mean he didn't feel for her. His lack of verbal expression certainly didn't mean she couldn't see for herself how much he cared.

He was going to love her like crazy. He would love her regardless of how much he fought for self-restraint. And there was no time like the present to start the hard-core loving.

\* \* \* \*

Santino carried her into the large shower stall and placed her on the rounded, built-in fiberglass stool. Two shower-heads rained with the hot water and she propped her head against the smooth surface behind her, watching him bathe in front of her. His muscles flexed without effort. He took a washcloth and rubbed his genitals eyeing her like he expected her to stop him, and she wished her hand had been there. At the same time, she'd never seen anything sexier.

Santino DeLuca possessed a raw hunger. The evidence existed in a gaze so hot that flames should've danced in his eyes. The hard length of his cock hanging between his legs presented a solid temptation. He washed and lathered, caressed and waited. Time was on his side. He would wait for her to move first if he had to stand there all night.

She went to him, passing off the same bar of soap he'd recently dropped in a dish. Turning her back, she pushed her hair away from her nape and handed him a washcloth,

He caressed her body with wandering hands and a soothing touch. There wasn't any doubt. Santino was her first breath and her second. He made her vulnerable, practically feeble when he touched her. But when they were together, facing their enemies, no one made her feel stronger or more capable than Santino.

"God, you feel so good." His lips maintained distance. A moist mouth hovered over hers but he didn't kiss her; only acknowledged he would by whispering one or two sweet nothings at the corner of her mouth. His fingers skimmed her curves. He smoothed his palms over her breasts and waist, finally reaching her bottom where he squeezed and released, breathing harder against her ear.

Controlled, Santino practiced forced restraint. He backed away from her and shook his head under the spouting water; as if he needed the drops of moisture in his face to shake him up or force him to reconsider. After the second time his will was lost. She deliberately stole it from him.

Ally wrapped her hand around his cock, and what started out as a slow-moving hand job turned downright dirty. She jerked him, working for a full release, one meant to destroy him in an instant.

"Ally," he rasped. "This is your last warning."

"You know what you can do with that warning."

His lips twitched and he pushed the weight of his cock through her tight grip. "Damn, baby."

Finally, she could breathe. She'd won. He would give her what she needed most right then.

His lips fluttered over her eyelids, then met the tip of her nose, and finally settled on her lips. His whole mouth collected hers, consuming one ravenous kiss after another.

Her nerve endings were sensitized under his touch and she was aware of the physical attraction as much as the psychological requirement. She needed Santino, in every aspect of her life.

"Don't lose me, Ally. Don't lose this. Let me have you without anyone else to interfere." He picked her up and hooked her legs around his middle.

"That's it, sugar. You know in your heart, you belong to me." His appetite for desire was evident in every syllable. The longing appeared in many forms, in his facial expressions and voice. Santino handled himself, fondling his cock until he settled the tip between her drenched pussy lips.

Grabbing her hips, he pressed her back against the slippery, wet wall and she opened up to him. And he found her just as wet as he'd left her before, drenching with a need so absurd he found it preposterous to think she'd actually believe she could ever do without him.

He fucked her. He buried himself balls deep inside her warm pussy and pounded inside her.

Santino gripped one of her hands while the other one held her ass. He wedged his cock inside her parted folds and plunged forward with a need so downright obsessive fighting for control of any sort would've been a mute effort.

"Ally, sweet Ally."

"Don't stop, Santino." She clawed his shoulders. Locking her ankles behind his back she gasped each time he drove into her and still begged for more.

The way he fucked her was a sinful surge of carnal desires. He couldn't control himself. He couldn't slow his pace. He used her body for leverage and as an anchor, stroking her with a force so powerful that instead of withdrawing after every thrust, he went deeper and deeper. "Ally, don't let me hurt you," he grated out, realizing he could in fact, rip her apart. "I never want to hurt you, baby," he said, pressing his forehead to hers. "Don't let me hurt you."

But he was probably fucking the life out of her. He couldn't stop. He couldn't slow down. There was rage—he was mad at himself for ever giving their enemies a clear shot at her. There was anger—he'd never forgive himself for almost losing her. And there was love, so much fucking love he wasn't sure how to cope.

And there she was, asking for pleasure and for pain by name. She nipped at his ear, sucking his earlobe between her hot little lips.

He pounded inside her and she whimpered, shaking with the pleasure oozing around his shaft. The burst of her climax coating him, enticing him, drawing out his release.

"Let me have you like no other man will, Ally." He should've been ashamed, alarmed by what he asked, but he wasn't.

Instead, Santino became ruthless. His cock stilled inside her, he carried her out of the shower, bypassed the need for towels and stalked the bed, literally pursued the damn thing.

Once there, he finally slid away from her.

He'd given her what she needed. Now, it was his turn to take what he wanted.

"Roll over for me, baby," he rasped.

She complied and he helped her to her knees, positioning her at the edge of the bed.

He pulled a few items from the nightstand. He rummaged through the drawer, tossed the condoms back to the table, resisting the urge to ask now. Ally had to be protected. They'd had sex twice and she hadn't stopped him. Why think about rubbers now?

He grabbed the lube and coated his fingers with the slick moisture, sliding them down the crack of her ass. "Good damn, I've dreamt of fucking you here, Ally. Everywhere you can take me, I want you."

She stilled against him. "You can't take me there."

"Where, Ally?" he whispered in her ear, fingering the seam of her ass, dragging his fingers closer to her hole. "Where won't I take you?"

"There!" she screamed. "I've never been taken there."

"Where, damn it!" He gave her ass a hard smack.

She cried out. "I can't take you in my ass."

"Oh, but baby girl, that's where I *am* fucking you." He issued a gentle reassuring caress and dipped his fingers in the lube again. Then, he fingered the forbidden passage, wedging three fingers inside her.

"No." She shook her head. "You can't. No, Santino. It won't work."

"It won't work?" he asked in a husky voice, wrapping one arm around her waist and pushing inside her, stretching her. "Oh, Ally," he crooned, removing his fingers.

He eyed her round bottom. Then, he fisted his cock and slid in place. Accepting the fact she would scream out her pain, but knowing all along how much she'd love the rear intrusion. "What doesn't work about this?"

"Oh God!" she screamed, bucking against him.

His thighs bunched. He'd warned her of this. He'd told her he would be unmanageable and this was why. He wanted to fuck out his frustrations. He needed to take her in every way humanly possible and it might take all damned night.

He pulsed inside her ass. Her tight passage allowed very little room. She stretched as he thrust inside her but she was tight. Oh so fucking ass-tight.

Santino's chest mashed against her back. He finger fucked her vagina and his balls slapped at her rear. Hell, he couldn't take her like this. He was already there, coming close to the end.

"Fuck!" he screamed. "Come on, baby. Let yourself go. Milk my fingers. Work it."

"Santino, please."

"Tell me what you want, Ally."

"I want you," she admitted.

His heart fluttered. Yeah, he knew that. They'd deal with that later. This was about sex now. Hardcore screwing, taking what they needed from one another, that's where they were. In the moment, living on the edge of whatever waited for them tomorrow.

Fuck! He knew better. She was stealing his soul, grabbing hold of his heart. "Ah yeah...I know what you want." He thrust inside her ass harder and harder. "This is what you need, isn't it, baby?" He nipped at her shoulder. His fingers left her pussy and he twirled her ripe little nipple between his fingers.

He hammered between her cheeks. He was vile and he couldn't help it. He wanted to fuck her so hard that she knew who had the equipment to please her. His thighs bunched and he hit that pace toward the end again.

"Tell me something, baby," he rasped against her neck, his breath ragged, tortured. "Can anyone fuck you like this?" His hips moved faster, his cheeks tightened, his fingers returned to her pussy and his thumb tweaked that little button a woman expects a man to manipulate because it made all the difference in the pleasure received. And yeah, he knew her hot little clit mattered.

"Santino, I can't take it. More."

That's about what he thought too. He couldn't take much more but there was still so much more to be had. "Fuck me hard, baby." He buried himself in her ass. The coming tide promised unraveled wits and an explosion laden with ecstasy. "Give it all to me, Ally." He ordered her, calling to her in a guttural plea. He twisted inside her, rubbed against her walls, and literally became a part of her.

"Oh God, Santino. This is wrong!" She bucked against him and his hand came down on her bottom. He spanked her with a tempered hand.

"Santino! Fuck!"

"That's right, Ally. You know who you belong to," he replied, smacking her bare ass over and over again.

And damn it all, just when he thought it was almost over, she cried out, "More, Santino. Harder. Deeper. Don't you stop, damn it. Don't you ever stop!" Her orgasm drew screams and she cried many tears.

She was an emotional wreck and he couldn't help her there, but he knew where she'd find her pleasure—in his arms and in his bed.

\* \* \* \*

After he carried her back to the shower, he cleaned her up and noticed the damage he'd inflicted on her inner thighs. She would bruise.

God help him if Dorsey saw her now. He'd kill him for what he'd done and maybe Santino would die without a fight. He should've been shot dead, revived and then shot again, all because he'd die a thousand deaths if each one could be experienced in Ally's arms.

He buried his head in her fragrant wet hair once they were back in bed. "Ally, I couldn't help myself."

What a lame excuse. He could've helped himself to a hand-job and left Ally out of the equation. Then again, he knew better. Releasing by means of self-infliction would only make him hungrier for the one he loved.

"You gave me what I needed, Santino," she told him, scraping her fingernails down his back.

"You didn't need this, never this Ally. I don't know what got into me."

She brushed the hair away from his face. "I knew what I was doing when I seduced you." She lightly touched her lips to his. "Oh Santino, I love you so much it hurts." She gulped, like in a moment of weakness she believed she may have revealed way more than she should have.

He closed his eyes, savoring what she'd said, understanding Ally wouldn't have been with him in the first place if emotions weren't already in play.

Afraid of what she might expect in return, he locked his mouth over hers. What he'd give to sink right back in between those legs and show her she chose a good man to love. Instead, he cherished the moment, kissed her like they'd never have another moment as precious as this one.

When their lips parted, she said, "You love me, too." He should've kept his mouth on hers, silencing her.

He didn't say anything and maybe she didn't expect it.

"I know it's complicated."

He pushed away from her and saw the hurt before he scooted to the edge of the bed. Trying to make things better for her, he kissed her forehead and stood up. "I'll round us up something to eat. You need to keep up your strength."

Santino began to shut down, just like he always did in matters of the heart.

\* \* \* \*

Ally jumped up with a sheet wrapped tightly around her body. Actually, she pulled all the covers off the bed when she crossed the room to stand in front of him. "It's easy for you to walk away from me, isn't it? The first time we were together on the yacht, you left me to go gather your thoughts and all things considered, I doubt you felt any better at the end of the night, did you?" She crossed her arms and stood in front of the door, blocking him.

"Ally, you know this can't work. We both know who you'll choose in the end. I even understand. You have his children, your little girls to think about. I can't compete with the history you and Tanner have and I don't know if I'd want to if I could." He tried to get around her, feeling for the doorknob in the darkness.

Her hand covered his wrist. "I gave my heart to Tanner Dorsey when I was a teenage girl," she explained, not that there was a need but because she obviously wanted to give him some background information. "I've loved him for as long as I can remember and then I met you."

His mouth twitched and his pulse raced. He was about to hear something that would change his life, or at least, his life course.

"Somehow, when I turned my head, looked the other way, I left myself vulnerable. Whatever part of me, whatever portion of my heart Tanner Dorsey doesn't have, he'll never have. You came in and stole my soul, Santino. When I least expected you, there you were. Now I'm terrified of what I feel, how I react to you. I can't live my life without you somewhere in it. I may have fallen for Tanner as a girl but I've fallen just as hard for you as a woman."

Santino pursed his lips and he unleashed the tone of a hardened man, a cold shell of a man who just can't give a damn. "You know who and what I am, Ally. I won't change."

"I love who and what you are."

"That's because you don't look at my hands and see them dripping in blood. You look at them and see the hands of a man who can and will protect you."

"No, that's not true. You've got it all wrong."

"Do I?" His mood blackened and he snapped her arm to his side and pushed her against the back of the bedroom door. His chest mashed against her back. "Tell me something, sweetheart, would you have shared—if that's what you're suggesting—Tanner with another woman, if he'd asked?"

"Tanner experienced his fair share of women," she snapped.

"So have I, many of whom I imagine you know plenty about, since you apparently snooped into my past when you were an agent. Promiscuous women who enjoyed things you can't even imagine. Things I

would go wild showing you but Dorsey would likely have my head severed if I so much as tried."

"This doesn't have anything to do with my past, or yours."

"It has everything to do with the future. You can't go around professing your love for a man you've only known a few months and hope to take him home to the man you're going to marry and ask him to accept the fact. It's much more complicated than that and far more dangerous than you can even begin to imagine."

"Why not?" she spat, sobbing. "I love you." When he didn't respond, she continued. "Tanner did this. He pushed me into your arms and he understood what the dangers were. He said so himself."

"Ally, because you made your choice a long time ago. Whatever we have right now isn't going to last forever. We can't make a future together. This won't work."

"Yes it will," she assured him, shaking her head. "You don't understand. I was there on that island, scared and alone. The only thought I had, the only one that kept me from choking on fear was that you were on your way. I knew you were coming for me, Santino or else I wouldn't have survived!"

"You are my job, damn it! You trust me to keep a deal made between me and the man who plans to make you his wife. I'm paid well to keep you alive!"

She twisted in his arms and faced him with an accusatory gaze and broken expression. "It's more than a damned job and you know it. Deep down you love me and you'd die to protect me because of that love. It's not because of the money or the price Tanner is willing to pay, but because *you* are in love with *me*."

"Move, Ally," he tried again.

"No."

"Ally, don't do this right now, damn it. It's been a long day, and an even longer week. We're both tired from all the running and hiding."

"Let's just keep running then, what do you say? How long can we do that, huh? Another month, how about a quarter? Have we spent three months together yet?" She shook with fury. "How about a fiscal year, you self-serving prick! Have we been on the run for a year, by chance? It sure seems like it."

Anger stamped its blasted impression across her face, reddening her cheeks. She pushed him as hard as she could because he felt her unmatched fury in the force of strength found only in the rage of a hurt woman.

Santino had faced off with similar anger before, but nothing like this. Through the years, he'd learned how to turn the other cheek as one woman after the next unleashed her disappointment. Leaving a trail of broken hearts had become his trademark and thanks to his swift departures, he left several women with distorted tainted memories.

It was who he was and he'd never felt one inch of remorse. Why should he? He'd always warned the women he took to his bed that he might revisit but he'd never stay forever.

They glared at one another and he saw the hurt he'd inflicted seeping into her soul. It only flickered in her eyes for a second but then the wounded heart of a true fighter flamed brighter showcasing new inner strength, her defiant will. "I'll tell Tanner you slept with me."

"Bluffing now, Ally?"

"Oh please, I don't bluff. Give me the phone, I'll call him now."

He thought about it. He'd like to get it out of the way sooner rather than later. "You know where the phones are, go fetch one." He rested his hand above her head, flat against the surface behind her. Damn, if she didn't make crazy-mad look sexy-beautiful. His mouth watered as he watched her.

"You son-of-a-bitch," she whispered and slowly moved out of his way. "Fetch one? How about you bite my ass?"

"Maybe that's not a bad idea."

"Oh, I see how it is now. You get a hard-on and decide it's time to fuck again. Hmm, that's really swell, Santino. Guess you want to fuck some of that anger out of me, huh? Well, newsflash. I need to fetch a phone, not another useless bone!"

Santino wanted to laugh outright but heaven help him if he did, she'd probably slap the shit out of him. Instead, he taunted her. "Say it's useless huh?" He pressed his hard length against her thigh. "Maybe I'll remind you of how many uses you found for it."

Her gaze draped over him with a look of forced contempt. "I'd rather fuck myself."

"Ally, don't tempt me," he said in a guttural voice. "I've seen the toy compartment of your little travel pack." His head dropped and he lowered his mouth to hers with a sure-fire way to declare one of them the winner of this fight.

"You're a snoop too, by the way."

"Yeah, I tend to go through a woman's things when she's packing enough ammo to destroy a man." He grunted and then ground against her. "And baby, *you are* packing," he said enthusiastically, eyeing her chest. "I swear you are."

"What I have in my bags shouldn't concern you."

"I wasn't talking luggage but since you mentioned it, everything about you interests me. You are my job, my business." Maybe he'd drive the point home enough to actually believe it himself. She was just another job, he mused. Yeah. Like hell.

He captured her bottom lip between his teeth and started to kiss her hurts away but she retaliated almost from the start.

"I *was* your job," she stated flatly with tears pooling in her eyes. "But that's about to change. If you'll excuse me, I have a phone to fetch and then, I'm going home." She opened the door and he slammed it. She turned her back to him and tried again, this time he grabbed her by the hair of her

head and held her to his chest with one hand while he wrapped his arm around her middle.

"Don't pull my damned hair!"

"Ally, you asked for it. Damn it to hell, you've practically begged for me to show you the man I am." He sneered. "Are you sure you want to see *him*? Are you, Ally? Do you want to fuck the killer or the man you think I am? Which one do you think you've had sliding inside that tight little snatch so far, hmm?"

Ally whimpered. Santino stripped her of her defenses. He knew just how to do it.

She bucked against him, wiggling her sweet little ass all over his cock. "I know who you are when you're with me and that's all I care about," she said softly.

"It's not enough." He ripped the bed sheet from her body and whirled her around to face him. "And there's no way in hell it will ever be enough." His lips slammed against hers and he lost his pants. Shit, he might as well keep them off when they were together. "I've never known a woman like you, Ally." His greedy cock took the lead, uncurling from his pants straight into the folds of her pussy.

He gathered her in his arms. He pressed her back against the door, stood between her legs and hammered inside her cunt, burying himself inside her channel until those hot, uncontrollable flames shot straight through his body into hers. He watched her writhe as he slammed against her with a pace so perverse, he should've been arrested for malicious intent. The impact of each thrust kept her moaning, grinding against him and cursing him under her breath at the same time.

Santino didn't want to take her this hard but he damned sure refused to take her easy. She'd pushed him, demanded far too much. Now, he didn't want to talk about his feelings, he just wanted her to know he possessed them.

She mattered to him. Surely if he stamped her pussy with the strength of ten thousand men, she'd

understand. She'd realize then what she meant to him. He gasped as the words hung deep in his throat and then he spit them out as if she'd left him any other choice. "I need you, Ally. Oh God, how I need you."

"I'm right here, Santino. All you have to do is love me, just love me." Her nails dug into his shoulders and she screamed out in tormented pleasure. Her body enveloped his and she rode his dick, working her slick pussy up and down his shaft. "Oh Santino, I feel what I do to you. You don't have to say it. I know you love me the way I love you."

"Shh, Ally." He tried to stop her from telling him so many times for fear he'd further seal their fate. It was hard enough preventing himself from returning the same sentiments. Instead, he said, "Just hold me, Ally. Hold me while you come for me."

## Chapter Thirteen

"Tell me you've found them." Tanner didn't face David and Darren but after watching them both rush from the docks, he was pretty sure Ally's brothers had some much needed news.

"Little Cayman. Santino has a place there," Darren blurted out the words destined to form a short and beautiful little melody.

"The source is reliable," David offered.

Tanner clenched his fists. "Are you sure?"

"Positive, but I know what you're thinking, Tanner, and it's not going to happen. Who will watch the girls?"

"I guess their uncles," Tanner snipped, opening the terrace door. The breeze brought in the unmistakable scent of salt water. "Is she being held against her will?"

"I doubt it," Darren remarked and then quickly added, "From what we can tell, Santino doesn't take his women there or his clients. He has a messenger who contacts him once a week to report on the Colombian situation, someone close to the inside."

"There's more, news I'm sure you'll like," David said. "Marcel Fernandez and about seven of his men were found dead, decaying with their identification still on them and that hit man Mezerati? He was a floater. His body washed up in Little Cayman, close to Santino's place."

Tanner grinned. "So this is why Santino took off?"

"We think so. From the pictures our men snapped, proof existed of a struggle inside a hut of some sort. Oh, and there's a snapshot of a bracelet. You'll recognize it." Darren pulled a photograph from his pocket and handed it to Tanner.

The picture of the silver peace sign charm sent his nerve endings into orbit. He'd given her that

bracelet and charm when she graduated from high school. He stared at the image until he felt a great sense of loss. "I've done everything I can to keep her safe but what a reminder this is. I may have gone the extra mile to protect her but I stripped her of any chance at happiness. She hasn't had one minute of peace."

David grumbled and grabbed a croissant from a bread basket. He poured a glass of orange juice and took a big gulp. "I'll go to Little Cayman."

"The hell you will!" David exclaimed, a shocking outburst fell from his lips like an order. The brothers immediately exchanged glances.

Tanner studied them. "I know what I'll find there. As long as she's okay, I don't care. As long as Santino kept her alive, I can handle whatever is going on between them."

"Can you handle it if she's in love with him?" Darren questioned him.

Tanner glared straight ahead, staring at the European columns beyond the terrace doors. "Yeah," he replied regrettably. "I'll deal with it."

"We warned you a long time ago," David reminded him. "Anytime you've ever been involved with Santino, it's a bad deal. The two of you are too much alike."

Darren took a bite out of his buttery bread. "Look at it this way, they may not have had other options. We know whoever was on that island fled by a small boat. It would've been difficult for a yacht to get in that cove. There wasn't any sign of a helicopter or tracks of any sort to suggest one landed there..

"We're guessing by the massacre that took place on the island that Santino and Ally fought their way out. I don't know if he used the fact her cover was blown to move her out from under our radar or if he really didn't have a choice. Their yacht hasn't moved from Grand Cayman since it reached the marina the day after we lost track of them. The staff is still awaiting orders and they're ready to sail. Those

instructions won't come. Santino won't risk taking her back to the boat."

"You're sure she made it out alive, one hundred percent certain?"

"Yeah, but Tanner, you may need to face the fact that some pretty ugly things may have happened to her." Darren's facial expression changed in an instant. Brooding anger washed over him. His eyes hazed, over with a light film. "It may have been really bad."

"What are you trying to say?" Tanner demanded. "Are you saying she was raped?"

"We don't know," David admitted.

The brothers gave one another a knowing glance and David shoved the rest of the croissant in his mouth. Grabbing a cocktail napkin, he wiped his lips, took another drink of juice and studied Darren. He didn't say anything.

"One of you start talking. What *do* you know?"

"Santino's clean-up crew went in after the deal was done. According to one of the guys, he met Santino to receive payment. They met on a beach near Santino's place and he was with a woman. It's the only indication we have Ally is alive," David said. "But there was a lot of blood when clean up went in to tidy up the mess on the other island."

Darren explained in short detail. "Apparently, Marcel had Ally delivered there in a tarp of some sort. Since there was some blood on the plastic and the sheet we assumed she was wearing—he paused in an apparent effort to let Tanner process that tidbit—we're afraid something really bad happened to Ally before Santino reached her."

"And then you have to consider what clean up crews discovered," David advised him. "Apparently, Santino didn't believe in an easy kill. He slaughtered half those guys and took a knife right across Marcel's throat, practically severed his head."

"Good God," Tanner said, realizing the actions of one provoked man, an angry man enraged over a woman. Yep, that certainly made sense.

"Our guys were waiting in Miami and after we heard someone was brought in for questioning, we had Santino's man picked up," Darren added.

"Did he know anything more?" Tanner probed for information.

"Only that Santino told him if the clean-up wasn't perfect, he'd hunt him down and gut him with a kitchen knife."

Tanner's lips twitched. Sounded like the Santino he knew. "And you think Ally is attracted *to that*?"

Darren shrugged and David made an excuse to leave on that note. "If I have to entertain my nieces for a few days, I'll find a woman who can do the same for me until you leave. I'll be back later."

After David left the room, Tanner turned to Darren. "She doesn't love Santino. There's no way she'd love a man like that. Do you hear me?"

"I hear ya."

"There's no practical reason for her to fall in love with a killer. Ally isn't the kind of woman who goes from one man's bed into another."

"Did it ever dawn on you that she hasn't been in *any* man's bed much?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on, man, you really want me to spell it out for you? She's my sister and I really hate to think of any man, even you...just scratch it."

Tanner focused on the man he wanted as a brother-in-law. They'd always shot straight with one another, especially where Ally was concerned.

"Have it your way." Darren went to the bar and poured himself a drink. He'd need one because Tanner wanted answers and Darren had some for him.

"I don't have all day here."

"It's none of my business but I'm guessing after all the cat and mouse games, you and Ally were only together a few times."

"Together?"

"Ah hell, man, you know what I mean. Don't make me say it. The woman is my sister, for crying out loud!"

"Go on and quit pussy footing around."

Darren shook his head in disgust. "From what I know of women, they are fine without sex until they have it. Once they do the deed, they know what they're missing and well, while Ally may have saved herself for you at first, I'm not sure how long that would hold after the fact."

"Eloquently put," Tanner said, sneering. "And you think because Ally has some sort of basic need now that she would go to bed with a man who kills for sport?"

A flicker of knowledge shot through Darren's eyes. He was a gambler, a bookie, but not a poker player. He shifted his weight and said, "I think Ally may have considered what she's missed."

"You think? Hell. Whatever you know, spit it out. I'm man enough to cope with it. Is she leaving me? Did she run off with DeLuca without intentions of coming home to her girls? What? Spit it out!" Tanner felt the anger pulsing in his neck as he glared at Darren.

One of the betting lines rang and Tanner grabbed it. "Sports."

Tanner rolled his eyes. He didn't have the patience for this right now. "Yeah, you got him. Lines on what game?" Tanner had a remarkable memory but in order to quote game lines, he'd have to know what teams were playing and for the first time in probably a decade, Tanner didn't have any idea. "Call back tonight. We're running behind here. Yeah, I know man. Life happens. It sucks sometimes...truly, it does." He snapped the phone closed and tossed it on the table. He folded his arms over his chest and waited.

"She's sleeping with him." Darren didn't waste time now. "If she's in love with him, I guess you'll have to hear it from her."

"You've talked to her?"

"No."

"Then how do you know she's fucking him?"

"David suspected it when he went to the boat after she was shot. You said yourself that's why you left. She called out for him, you heard her and you were out of there." Darren squinted, "Did it ever occur to you to stick around until she was conscious again? Or did it cross your mind she called out for the only person she thought was around to help her?"

"I was beside her, damn it."

"And she was doped up on morphine, too. She had two slugs put in her ass. I doubt she was thinking of any damned man or his feelings after having those bullets scraped out of her butt."

Tanner's gaze returned to the magnificent gold-embedded columns. "So, where did you get the crazy idea that she's with him now?"

"Oh, we know she's with him in Little Cayman."

"I mean, sleeping with his sorry ass!"

"The proof was in the stateroom. David checked out the boat after the crew returned it to Grand Cayman."

"That's been over two months ago and you're just now telling me this? How long have you known she was in Little Cayman?"

"Man, come on now. We've been searching for her as hard as you have. We just found out her exact location this morning."

"But you kept her arrangement with Santino quiet, why?"

Darren lips formed a line of solid determination. "She's still our sister. What she does in her private life is her business."

"You never had a problem telling her what to do before. Hell, if you and David would've left us alone years ago, our lives would all be different now. I

would've married her right out of high school and she wouldn't have faced so many difficult choices. She damned sure wouldn't be sleeping with a man like Santino DeLuca!"

He kicked a few toys out of his way. He was tired of tripping over toys. It was time to go bring home the mother of his children. She could chase around the girls for awhile; that is, if he ever let her leave the bedroom long enough to see them.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to Little Cayman and I'm bringing her ass home."

"It's still too dangerous. It's not safe."

"What? Are you telling me Santino DeLuca is the only man alive who can keep her well protected?"

"You can answer that better than I can. You're the one who hired him and you're the one who has spent the most time with him, given your history."

Tanner was frustrated and angry as hell. "He had this planned from the beginning."

"Damn it." Darren stood in front of Tanner. "This is your fault as much as it is his or Ally's. Now, I don't particularly care for the man but you made your choice. You decided he was the only one who you trusted to keep her alive. He's done that and—"

"And he should've shown some respect and stayed out of her pants!"

"Yeah, I see your point, man." Darren started to walk away and then he thought of something else. "No, actually I don't. How in the bloody hell was DeLuca supposed to keep his hands off of her if he had to stay with her around the clock, huh? You told him he couldn't go anywhere without her. She was supposed to stay in the same room with him every minute of every day. How in the hell was that supposed to work out without an end result just like the one you got?"

Tanner bowed his head. "I just thought she loved me enough."

"She probably thought the exact same thing while she was in Florida living as a virgin and you were screwing everything in short skirts." Darren walked out and left him to chew on a little truth. He didn't like the way it tasted—at all.

## Chapter Fourteen

Ally was in the kitchen when Santino came home. It was odd how comfortable things were between them. How quickly she'd turned his life inside out and somehow made him feel like a normal man, a man who deserved a home and a family.

"Hey." He kissed her on the cheek and immediately noticed his own damp lips. "Are you crying?" he asked, setting the bag of groceries on the counter. He'd known this day would come. Ally probably missed her girls more and more with each passing day. And she probably missed Tanner. He had been a very big part of her life.

She sniffed, wiped the moisture on the back of her hand and stared at him like she blamed him for something.

"Want to tell me what's going on?"

That's when the flood came. She fell against him and sobbed.

"Hey now, what's this?" He clutched her head against his shoulder and rocked her.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and cried uncontrollably. All he wanted to do in that moment was take her pain away. "Ally, talk to me. What's going on today?" He caressed her back and waited for her reply.

She sniffed a few times and then buried her head in his shirt again. "I'm—"

"You're what, sugar?"

"I can't talk to you about this!" She flew out of the kitchen and ran up the stairs.

"What the hell had he done?" He stopped right there before he made the mistake of following her. Whatever had her upset, he wasn't going to ease her into his arms and make everything right for her. Maybe she needed time alone. Maybe he needed to

learn how to deal with women, particularly the one sobbing herself into a fit upstairs.

He rolled his eyes and glanced around the kitchen. Everything in his townhouse was spotless. Since Ally had moved in, the dust mites moved out.

She set up housekeeping in a matter of a few short weeks and sent him on daily errands to retrieve whatever she needed. They'd been on the run, or in hiding, for over eight months. Four of those months, Tanner Dorsey hadn't known where to find her, but the Colombians had lost their trail as well. Ally was safe. He'd kept her alive and safe.

Better still, she told him two or three times a day how happy he made her. Apparently, all bets were off today. He didn't know what he'd done this time but apparently he did a mighty fine job of ruining her afternoon.

Santino unpacked the brown paper sack. He pulled a bottle of wine from the refrigerator and popped the cork. Grabbing two wine goblets from the cabinet, he started up the stairs. Allowing the glasses to swing casually by the stems, he made his way to the master bedroom. She wasn't there.

Immediately, alarms went off in his head. He placed the glasses and wine bottle on the nightstand. "Ally?"

Reaching under the mattress, he found one of Ally's guns and released the safety. "Ally?" He approached the bathroom and knocked on the door. "Are you in there, Ally?"

He heard her sniffles. "Go away."

Closing his eyes, he was thankful she was still having her woman fit. He returned the safety and then slid the gun back under the mattress. It was only then that he released a heavy sigh of relief.

Now, he wanted to kick her ass.

Before he thought about it, he walked over to the bathroom and knocked a little harder. "Ally, whatever the problem is, we can work it out. I know you want to be with your family. You miss your little

girls. I understand. Well, actually I don't because I don't have kids of my own but I think..."

Ally flung the door open and marched right by him. She didn't look at him.

He grabbed the doorframe with both hands and stretched inward. What the hell did he do? He'd never understand women. With another big deep breath, probably his last, given her mood, he turned toward the battle ahead.

"What's the problem, Ally? This isn't like you."

Her eyes narrowed and she seemed to focus on his cock although, if he wanted to gauge the way she looked at his dick, she didn't seem all that impressed at the moment. In fact, judging by her glare, she looked at him—it—like she wanted to strike, not fuck. It was enough to send a shiver or two down his spine.

"Why don't you have kids?" she blurted out the question.

"Huh?" Her inquiry took him by surprise.

"It's not a complicated question. You said, 'you don't understand how I feel exactly because you don't have kids of your own' and I want to know why you don't."

He swallowed hard, stared harder. "I've never thought about kids because of my job. It's not exactly a family-friendly career, if you get my meaning."

"That's how you describe your killing career?" She was picking an argument.

"No, not really but let's be sensible here. If I had a child, given my killing job, as you so eloquently put it, my child or children would always face danger. You should know that better than anyone. Look at your girls. They can't have their mother with them because if you go to them before it's safe for you to be there, you could put them at risk."

She glared at his cock again and his dick twitched. Damn it. She saw the wiggle because she looked at him with pure disgust. Sure enough, fucking was far from her mind.

"So you don't want children, right?" she asked, clarifying something.

"Ally, where is this going?" His heart beat faster and faster. Reality flashed in front of him. He'd never used a condom with her, never. Initially, he assumed she was on the pill and later she confirmed it. She was on birth control. He saw the pills. She had a year's supply of the damned things. Thank goodness, because he'd acted irresponsibly and trusted her to take care of things.

"Forget about it," she said, pouring herself a glass of wine and then studying it like she'd never seen chardonnay. She didn't drink it. She didn't swirl the liquid around in her glass and take a first sip like she typically would have after she poured glass number one.

Santino walked into the closet and tugged a metal box from the top shelf. He brought it over to the bed and opened the lid. He tossed his ID and wallet inside, locked it by a combination again, then returned to the closet.

"Who were you today?" she asked sarcastically. Over fifty identities were in the locked box. All fifty had social security numbers, US addresses, credit cards, and passports.

He ignored her question and stared at the untouched glass. "Something wrong with the wine?"

"No, it's fine."

"You haven't touched it."

"Yes, I have."

Now she was fibbing and he was getting nervous.

He stormed across the room and picked up the glass. He studied it and then set it down. With his index finger, he tilted her chin up and studied her lips. "Then why is it that your hot pink lipstick isn't trimming the rim?"

She narrowed her gaze. "What is this? Some kind of interrogation?"

"You're pregnant." All the signs had been there. She'd lost a lot of weight and claimed she had a

stomach bug whenever she didn't feel well. Lately, she'd had a few unwell moments, primarily in the morning. He didn't consider a pregnancy because it never occurred to him. Why would it? She was on the pill. She'd taken precautions.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She buried her face in her hands and wailed like a baby.

"Damn," he grated out. *Fuck!* He ran his hand through his hair. He didn't know what else to say. What does a man say when he finds out his woman—the one who wasn't really 'his' woman—is pregnant?

Drawing her knees to her chest, Ally rocked back and forth. She glared at the guilty party again. *His cock*. Apparently, she forgot her role in all this. Maybe he should stare at her pussy with contempt too and then she'd get the message.

He tried to think of something to say. He opted for a little humor to break the ice. "Are you sure the baby is mine?"

Her mouth dropped open wide and she literally jumped from the bed. "You arrogant piece of shit! I cannot believe you'd ask me such a ridiculous, asinine question." She gritted her teeth and then in mockery, she said, "Is it mine?" Storming away from him, she trotted back downstairs ranting and raving. "Good grief, no, it isn't yours! Hell no! It's not yours. It's Tanner's. I'm sure of it. Even though I haven't been in his arms in nearly a year, I'm certain he's the damned daddy!"

Boy, did he fuck up this time. Santino sprinted down the steps behind her. "Ally, wait a minute." She already had the back door open to the courtyard. He didn't want to draw attention with a pending argument. "Shut the door, baby. Let's talk about this."

"Why? So we can figure out who might have impregnated me, a woman who hasn't been out of your blasted sight for more than a minute at any given time!"

"I was kidding, Ally. I screwed up. I was trying to make light of the situation and it obviously made it worse. Of course I'm the father." His heart sang. For some reason, right then, he gained acceptance and his spirits were uplifted.

She glared at him and then stared at his cock with pure fury raging in her eyes.

"Don't look at me like that. I could return the favor, you know. Your hot little twat wasn't exactly off limits to me."

"Oh, you...you...bastard!" She stormed back inside, slammed the door and hit the steps again.

"Oh no you don't." He grabbed her around her middle and stopped her. "Exercise is great but I don't want you falling over your own feet and tumbling down the stairs. You're going to sit down and we're going to talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about. You'll take me somewhere to get an....an...well, you know!"

She couldn't say it and he couldn't think it.

"I'll have an..." She tried again.

"No you won't, Ally."

"You don't want a baby. You don't even want me!"

That's where she was wrong. Santino wanted her more than anything he'd ever wanted in his life. Tanner Dorsey still had a strong hold on Ally and he didn't want to compete with another man. He didn't think it was possible to anyway, until now.

"Sit down, Ally. I guess it's time we have that little talk."

Ally sat on one side of the sofa, Santino sat on the other. His breathing was abnormal and a few beads of sweat popped across his forehead. He tried to swipe them away as soon as he felt them there. "I'm going to open the back door. Try to keep it to a low roar." He made his way across the room and she watched him as if she expected him to break down.

He pushed the ottoman in front of her and sat with his hands between splayed legs. He gently lifted her legs to position them on his lap. "Better?"

Her tears stopped then but the few remaining ones still moistened her cheeks. He left her again and walked to the bathroom. After retrieving a few tissues, he returned once more.

Handing them to her, he was mesmerized. How had he missed this? She glowed. Even in her sorrow, she looked like the most beautiful woman in the world with a true shine on her cheeks, a lovely fullness in her breasts, something he'd pay closer attention to once he stripped her clothes away from her again.

"I should've been more responsible. I should've taken on the responsibility, Ally."

"It's not your fault."

"Phew, you don't know how glad I am to hear you say that." He leaned back on one arm and braced himself against his elbow. "The way you've glared at my dick, I thought a protective cup might be handy to have about right now."

He thought his comment was funny, but she didn't laugh.

"I love you, Ally." It was the first time he'd ever said the words and now, they simply drifted across his tongue. He didn't move closer to hold her, he didn't want to caress her right then. Instead, he wanted to see the impact of his confession. He just watched her.

She dabbed her eyes. "I know you do. It's just nice to finally hear it."

"Ally, I don't love anyone or anything like I love you and that includes myself, so maybe you can grasp the kind of fear I'm facing right now."

She blew her nose. "A child changes things."

"My child—our baby—changes everything."

"I know, Santino," she wailed.

Great. Maybe he'd have her make a list of things he should and shouldn't say while she was pregnant.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Someone will need to tell Dorsey and I think it should be me. I don't want you upset right now."

"I think he would appreciate hearing this from me first."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any idea when you might have gotten pregnant?"

She stared at him blankly. "Do I look psychic? We have sex four and five times a day sometimes. How the hell would I know?"

He hoped she was moving mighty close to the third trimester because her temperament left a lot to be desired. "Maybe we should have a doctor come here and run some tests, find out how far along you are and make sure you're healthy." Maybe he'd prescribe some nerve pills too. He'd probably need several bottles.

"I may be further along than I think," she said, tugging her shirt free from her pants. "Look."

She stood up and raised her shirt. A small pouch, the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen, rounded her little belly.

"Oh, Ally." He dropped his head to her stomach and held her close to him, his cheek resting against their baby, and his woman. Right now, this was what mattered, nothing else.

Her hand rested against the top of his head. "I'm speechless." He kissed her skin, locked his hands around her waist and pampered her with warm kisses of complete adoration. They weren't sexual in any way, but gratifying nonetheless.

Pulling her to him, he brushed her hair away from her face. "When Marcel grabbed you from that boat, I knew then. I'd die to protect you and I also realized that if Marcel got to you, if he harmed you in any way, I'd feel your pain if he made you suffer. It's hard to explain but I think if he'd taken you, if he'd taken what didn't belong to him, I would've known."

"You thought he was going to rape me."

He gulped. The memory of that fear washed over him. The fury returned. "I would've tortured the man for days, weeks, months." His tone was so dark, he had to refocus his attention on something else. "I would have lost my mind, Ally."

She shot him a weak smile. "I love you."

He nodded. He loved her too. He possessed an obsessive love for Ally, one he didn't know how to control because he didn't know how to love.

Ally touched his cheek and then curled her arms under his, locking her wrists around his back. "I know why Tanner chose you."

He chuckled. "I do, too."

"He knew you'd take care of me."

"That he did, Ally. And from the beginning, he probably knew how many different ways I'd do it, too. Tanner and I understood one another. He gave unspoken requests, in many ways, but he also understood there would be an attraction. I think he was praying all this other stuff would go away faster than it has but that's a risk he took in order to keep you alive."

"I miss him, you know?"

And it hurt like hell for him to answer her. Knowledge of it was one thing but to verbally recognize it pained him. "I know."

"I can't have this baby if you're only going to take him or her away from me. I can't lose another child."

Santino's caresses were firmer then. He massaged his fingers into her skin, dragging them up and down her back. Kissing her on top of her head, he told her the only thing he could and he did it without making promises. "I'll figure this all out. Everything will be fine."

## Chapter Fifteen

Several Months Later

"She had a boy." Darren sat on a nearby lounge. Tanner had been out by the pool all day, watching the girls play. Molly pissed Holly off when she sprayed her in the face with a water gun. Holly now avoided her sister at all costs.

"A boy," Tanner mumbled, despondent. She'd had a difficult pregnancy and even though Tanner was secretly paying the doctor who visited the home she shared with Santino, sometimes he went days without receiving news from the Cayman Islands. David had been staying in Grand Cayman, just in case she needed anything.

Tanner tossed his sunglasses on and stood up. "Did you tell your mother?"

"Momma hopes you'll let her come home now. The Colombians aren't going to keep pursuing this since we stopped moving the merchandise. Momma wants to see her grandson. We all want Ally home."

Tanner watched his girls swim around in circles, defiantly avoiding one another. He smirked at the irony. Right now, he wanted to avoid Santino and he imagined Santino felt the same way.

"It's safe for her to come home now. The Colombians have stopped searching for her, moved on to other things. Most assume she's in a witness protection program. Some assume she's dead."

"Why didn't you let Ally know you were there when you visited Little Cayman?" Darren was curious. He'd wanted to ask before but he hadn't dared. Tanner was so distant, it was a topic they didn't discuss because Tanner threw himself into raising his daughters and setting up one offshore casino and sportsbook after another.

"I went there to bring her back. I went there because I'm a jealous man. I'm a controlling, egotistical person who wanted Ally back in my arms just so I knew she wasn't in his. If it meant putting her life at risk, I didn't care. It wasn't something I was willing to think about or consider because I was going crazy without *her*."

"And that changed when you found out she was pregnant?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. Then he cleared his throat. "Maybe, yeah some. I never told you this but when I went to Little Cayman, I watched Ally all morning. She was in their villa, watering plants, humming, dusting the tables, putting dishes away, and living this perfectly normal life."

"Well, I guess she didn't have a lot to do other than make the most of her life. She didn't have any idea how long he was going to keep her there."

"Santino ran out to the market that day. Before he came home, I saw her dash to the bathroom with her hand over her mouth. A few minutes later she came out with a washcloth to her head and her hand resting against her stomach. I knew right then."

"So you left."

"No, I waited. I watched DeLuca come home, kiss her and then stand in the kitchen, stunned as she left him there to digest whatever she told him. I hate to say it but I almost felt sorry for the guy. He looked helpless. I don't know what she said to him then but he followed her upstairs. I tried to find an open window so I could listen too but when I didn't I started to give up and go to the front door and just ring the doorbell. Hell, I didn't know what I'd say but I wanted to take Ally away from him. I longed to stop her before she told him the truth."

"Then, I heard them talking. I heard the little quiver in her voice, the anxiety she must've felt because of another pregnancy with a man who was nothing more than a criminal. And I heard him tell her he loved her." Tanner walked away from Darren

then. "He loves her and I want her home with me, with Molly and Holly. How's this supposed to work out for Ally? Has he thought about that? Have I?"

Darren shook his head. "Man, I don't know what to tell you, but you need to resolve your troubles with my sister. We can't afford Santino, if he's still running up a tab with us, unless we're operating at full capacity, and you know I'm talking about all of our businesses. David has new contacts to replace our previous partners in Colombia and the casinos are profitable. It's supposed to be a year for the bookies. Still, we have to get this Ally-problem under control soon."

"I know. I'm going to give her and DeLuca a few weeks to enjoy their little boy. I'll let them have what I didn't have with my girls. I owe them that much. I put them together and I'm not going to show a jealous hand by tearing them apart right now."

"You're going to bring that bastard's kid in here and raise him as your own though, aren't you?"

"With some conditions," Tanner said.

"Care to share what you're thinking?"

"Not until I talk to Ally."

\* \* \* \*

Santino watched her sleeping with his little boy in the curve of her arm. He was so tiny, even against his mother's petite frame.

Ally didn't look good. She was pale, white as a ghost actually, but she'd come through her pregnancy like a trooper, even agreeing to a midwife since Santino didn't want the birth of their child to send out a loud cry for attention. He suspected the Colombians backed off some but why tempt them with the birth of a killer's child?

He eased onto the bed and cradled Ally against his chest. He kissed her forehead and caressed her arm. "I'll love you forever, Ally Stephens."

She snuggled closer, holding their baby close enough to bury him against her breast. He reached

over and made sure the child had breathing room and his little eyelids twitched.

In a few hours, the baby would squeal for attention, and he would warm the bottles and feed him. Ally decided not to nurse their son for reasons she didn't discuss with him, but down deep he understood. The underlying fear was due to the separation she experienced with her daughters.

He touched his son's hand. "You have two beautiful half sisters, from what I understand."

Ally heard him and wrapped her hand around his neck. "I love you, Santino," she mumbled and fell into another deep sleep.

He kissed her parched lips and pulled his son from her arms. "I love you, too, Ally DeLuca." And he stopped himself cold. What the hell was he thinking? He looked down on his son and then back at Ally, who was unaware of the feelings she'd just stirred inside of him. He closed his eyes and moved away from the bed. He placed the boy in his cradle and headed downstairs.

Once there, he broke down. He was going to die when Tanner took her away, when Tanner came for his son and his woman, and he would come.

Santino stared out at the beach, struggling to make sense of too many emotions, too many distorted feelings. He didn't want to let Ally go because he didn't think he'd ever be the same without her, but he also understood she had another family waiting for her. She had little girls and they needed their mother. They were the missing links in Ally's life.

She missed them, just like she'd miss the little baby they'd brought into the world, only he wasn't going to ask her to choose. He would let them both go and he needed to do that soon.

He walked over to the coat closet and tugged a cord from the wall. The phone was charged. Tanner was waiting. He'd been postponing this call for a very long time. Santino took a deep breath and exhaled. He hit the code and waited for someone to answer.

Five rings, he answered. "Dorsey."

"It's DeLuca."

"So nice of you to call." His tone was cool but controlled. "Is Ally okay?"

"She's fine."

"The baby?"

"He's fine."

"Give him my last name on the birth certificate."

Santino wasn't surprised that Tanner received the news of Ally's pregnancy. The son-of-a-bitch probably knew where they were from the moment he arrived there with her. He was fooling himself if he thought otherwise.

"I can do that, if it's what Ally wants."

"She probably doesn't know what she wants, no thanks to you."

"It's easy to blame me, isn't it?"

"What do you expect here, DeLuca?"

"I expect you to get on the first plane to Little Cayman and come here to pick up your woman and my son."

"I like the way you put that. It's interesting, really. Your son, my woman. Did it occur to you that if you'd kept *your* cock in *your* pants, we wouldn't have the issue of a kid in the picture?"

Yeah, it did, more than once or twice. Now, something else slapped him with a dose of reality. The way he referred to the son Ally gave him. Dorsey would treat him like an unwanted step-son, and why wouldn't he? Santino's son would be a constant reminder of what another man shared with his woman.

"Ally wants her girls with her," Santino told him.

"I want Ally."

"I'm sure you do."

"And you do as well?" Tanner asked.

"She's the only bright spot I've had in my life, until now."

"And you're going to hand them both over to me."

Santino wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement. He didn't quite know how to respond because when he'd first dialed Tanner's number, he was in fact, contemplating the hand-off. Now, he wasn't sure.

"That is what you're saying, right? I'm going to come down there and pick them up, and you're fine with the fact you'll never see them again?"

"Dorsey, I'm a man who is going to return a woman to the guy who hired me to do a job. I did what I was paid to do. It's time for Ally to go home."

"Is that right? Just a job for another guy, right?"

"Yep, that's it."

"So tell me, since we're talking about Ally as nothing more than a job, how much do I owe you for fucking the woman I thought was mine? See, I had claims on Ally in every way that mattered. I took her virginity, she had a true, pure love for me, one untarnished by any other man. She gave me two beautiful little girls and she loved only me unconditionally."

"What's your point, Dorsey?"

"My point is, you took all that away and now I can't get that Ally back. She's gone. She's been in your bed night after night, I don't care to guess how many times you've fucked her but I imagine it's been more than the few times I've had the chance. She gave you a son and, from what I can tell, she loves you, in spite of everything."

"Yeah, she does love me."

"This worked out well for you, didn't it?" Tanned asked, a real resentment in his tone.

Santino set his jaw. He sat down on the last step and held the phone out in front of him. He started to flip the phone closed and decided he understood the anger Dorsey felt. The least he could do was listen to what the man had to say. "Will you come here?"

"No. You'll bring her to me."

"I'll what?"

"In eight weeks, I'll call you. Eight weeks and you'll bring Ally to me here. David will meet you and show you the way. David has a hot little number he's visiting in Grand Cayman now and he'll be nearby. If you need something, anything at all for Ally, you'll let me know?"

"Yeah, I'll let you know."

"And DeLuca?"

"Yeah?"

"You take care of her and tell her I love her."

"Will do." He slapped the phone shut, infuriated by Tanner's last request.

He should've told Dorsey to go fuck himself but then again, he kept going back to all the reasons why it was hard to hate the man. Tanner had Ally first and if Tanner Dorsey never had her in the first place, Santino DeLuca's path would've never crossed with the only woman he'd ever loved.

Santino wouldn't know the joy found in hearing his first-born son cry out for a little love and attention. He stood at the bottom of the stairs and listened to the little guy give his lungs a real workout. Snickering, he made his way to the kitchen to get the little boss of the house his bottle. Yeah, he could thank Dorsey for *that*.

## Chapter Sixteen

"Momma?" Ally walked into the study with Darren, David, Santino and a new bundle wrapped tightly in baby blankets.

"Ally?" The older woman moved faster than anyone had probably witnessed in over a year. "Ally!" She hugged her so hard she forgot all about the baby Ally held until the child cried out in obvious discomfort.

Mrs. Stephens pulled back the corner fold of the blanket and held her breath. "Oh my Lord, he looks just like your brothers."

"Yeah, beauty runs deep in this family." Darren squeezed his sister. "The little dude looks a lot like his handsome uncles, huh?"

"He does," she said, continuing to admire her grandson. "Oh, Ally, he is a beautiful child." She touched her daughter's face and then turned to the man standing nearby. "I'm sure you're very proud, Mr. DeLuca." She tried to remain somewhat cordial.

"Please, call me Santino."

"Very well," she said, nodding. Then, she patted Ally's arm. "Let me have my grandson. You two go on out there and see the girls. Tanner should be back shortly. I'm sure he'll be glad to see you," she said.

Ally's mother was too old to worry about things that didn't concern her and Ally realized her mother was far too partial to Tanner to ever accept Santino's presence in her life. "David, go with your sister and her...friend. The girls may not know how to react to their mom's homecoming."

Homecoming? Ally didn't know if that was the appropriate way to describe her reunion with her family. She'd have a lot to get used to. The house was like a castle, and an ostentatious show of wealth. Home didn't come to mind. Ally reached for Santino's

hand instinctively but she dropped it as soon as her mother and brothers showed their displeasure.

"I can't wait to see the girls," Ally said all at once, rushing toward the terrace doors. "Hang on, Ally. There's something you should know first." David warned her before she opened the doors. "It's about Molly."

Concern washed over Santino's face and Ally studied his expression before she focused on David, holding her breath, waiting for some sort of devastating news. "What?"

"Ally, it appears Molly is quite attached to me and really, no one else."

Ally giggled. "I'm sure that's *so true*."

"It is," Darren retorted. "No one can manage the child any better."

"She'll be glad to see me." Ally dismissed the warning and rushed toward the girls. Tanner had once told her how the girls loved to play in the water. They were swimming around in a circle, playing tag, when she walked outside.

Holly looked up at her mother. Familiarity washed over her face and she reached for her immediately. "Momma?"

Ally dropped her handbag and ran down the three steps into the shallow end of the pool. She grabbed Holly and hugged her close to her chest, staring over the little girl's head, searching the eyes of her other small child. "Molly, do you have a hug for me?"

Holly clung to her and looked back at her sister. "It's Momma," the little girl told her sister.

"No." With her orange floating devices keeping her above the water, she kicked her feet and swam into the deep end of the pool.

Ally cried and laughed at the same time. So many emotions pulled at her heart as she held one daughter and admired the other for her spunk and independence. She had a good reason, a very good reason to feel what she wanted to feel. She wouldn't push her until she was ready to come around.

"Molly, what did I tell you about playing on that side of the pool?" David scolded her.

She reached for him with one arm. "Get me."

David started for her but then stopped. "Swim back to your mom, she'll help you."

Ally smiled and mouthed the words 'thank you' but Molly started to wail like someone who was used to crying and getting exactly what she wanted.

David stood his ground. "Molly, your mother is home now. She's safe and sound with her family." He shot Santino a pointed glare. "The least you can do is swim over there and give her a hug."

"She's a 'wittle' bad girl sometimes," Holly said, cupping her hand over her mouth and Ally's ear.

"A 'wittle' bad girl, huh?" Ally laughed outright and tickled her daughter silly. Holly laughed and laughed, wiggling free at the same time.

"I don't wanna see her. Get me." Molly was persistent and Ally didn't know how much she should press the issue. She didn't have to wonder long.

An older woman dressed in a plaid skirt rushed outside as if the sky were falling right then and there. She walked over to a cabinet behind the loungers and pulled free two beach towels.

David introduced the nanny. "Mrs. Thacker, this is Ally."

"I know who she is," Mrs. Thacker said. "And I certainly know who *he* is." She walked to the other side of the pool and plucked Molly from the water. Ally locked gazes with David.

"I don't mind to take care of my own children," Ally informed the impolite woman.

"It's time for their nap. They get fussy if they don't stay on schedule." She turned her back to Ally and then grumbled, "Something a good mother would know, if she wasn't scooting around the country with her lover."

Santino's face turned beet red. "Was that appropriate?" His thick arrogance laced every syllable he spoke. Ally shook her head. She realized if the

girls trusted this woman, the last thing she needed was to cross her in front of her daughters.

"Holly?" Mrs. Thacker held out her arms with a lime green towel draped over her back. "Let's go."

"I wanna play with Momma."

"I'm sure you do, darling. Will you be here when the girls wake-up?" she asked with a certain snip to her inquiry.

"Yes, of course." Ally swam to the side of the pool and kissed Holly on the cheek. "I'll see you after your nap."

Holly's lower lip quivered and she kissed Ally's cheek back in response before she held up her hands and waited for Mrs. Thacker to pull her out of the water.

She giggled and then looked at her mother. Ally smirked as she turned around to hide the obvious pleasure she took watching the little girl go the extra mile to make it difficult for Mrs. Thacker.

The pitter-patter of little feet slapped against the tile floor as they trotted off with their caregiver. Over her shoulder, Mrs. Thacker made one final snide remark. "David, there are more towels over here in the basket. I haven't had time to put them away and your sister is going to show everything she has when she gets out of the water. A white pantsuit doesn't conceal anything when it's wet."

Ally swam to the side and pressed her chest up against it. "David? Would you be a dear and grab me a towel? The bitchy one didn't have time to put the towels where they belong, and the 'white pantsuit doesn't conceal anything when it's wet', you know."

Ally looked down and noticed the contour of her nipples pressed through the material. She imagined her thong and everything it didn't cover would be all too obvious once she left the crystal blue waters.

David, retrieved a towel and then tossed it on a nearby chair. "I'm not interested in seeing what you don't have on under that pantsuit. I'll wait in the

study. Your luggage is already in your room, if you want to change."

After he disappeared, Ally used the ladder to pull herself up. Santino leaned over and grabbed her wrist, tugging her straight against his chest. "Damn, what a body."

"Damn, what an ass." Tanner's voice stilled her where she stood. She didn't know which way to turn, what to say, what to do. She wiggled free of Santino's grip and turned to face him.

As soon as Ally saw Tanner, everything came rushing back at one time. She squeezed Santino's arm and then sprinted around the pool, jumping into Tanner's arms in a split second, wrapping her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. She kissed him all over his face.

He cupped her bottom with both hands and sat down on a lounge with her as her mouth covered his in a bruising kiss. She sensed Santino watching them but she couldn't help herself.

This was Tanner. This was the man she'd always loved, the man who would walk through hell to find a way, any way to save her. That's when it hit her. Struggling against his firm grip, she turned to look at *that man*. The one who not only tried to find ways to protect her, but found them by acting on them himself. He placed himself in front of danger for her and he did it because he valued her life more than his own.

Surprisingly, she didn't see the hurt she thought she might find in his eyes. Instead, he cautiously walked over to where Ally and Tanner were seated and reluctantly offered his hand. "Tanner, it's good to see you."

Ally brushed Tanner's shaggy hair away from his face. "Yeah, it is." She hopped off his lap and Tanner rose to shake Santino's extended hand.

"Thank you for bringing her back to us," Tanner said, studying the gesture like he might not take the hand offered.

"It's my pleasure."

"Yeah, well, about that..." Tanner threw a sucker punch and, with a right hook to the jaw, Santino landed in the pool.

A spray of water left his hair when he resurfaced and shook his head. Santino rubbed the corners of his mouth. "I should've known. You're still a spoiled little twerp ready to throw a tantrum when he doesn't get his way."

Tanner started for him again.

"Tanner!" Ally shoved him out of the way and rushed to the side of the pool. "Now, why the hell did you have to do that?" She wheeled around and pointed her accusing finger in his face.

"Surely to God, you don't have to ask," Tanner said, delighted he threw the first one apparently.

Ally pursed her lips and set her jaw.

"Ah now, Ally, come on, the man fucked the woman I planned to marry."

"It happened more than a few times, too," Santino taunted him rubbing his jaw. Then, he added, "Damn you, Dorsey. This was a new suit."

"My money may have paid for it."

"Yeah, well, your money hasn't paid for anything but that damned boat that is better called a ship than a yacht. I haven't spent one red cent of your fucking money!" He swam over to the ladder with one arm helping him get there and the other held against his face. "Damn you, what a punch."

"You're lucky I didn't break your jaw."

"Tanner, stop this," Ally insisted. She stood in front of him with her palms planted against his chest. He glanced down and licked his lips. "Good damn, woman, those boobs look good enough to eat."

"Knock it off."

"Hell no. While you were fucking your way through the last year, I've gone back to self-sex. It sucks, really it does. The first thing I'm going to do here today is strip you down and spank that ass of yours for being so horny, then I'm going to make sure

you know what it means to go crazy with hunger, the kind I've dealt with for over a year."

Santino draped a towel over his shoulder and brought Ally one, too. "Do that again and I'll return the favor," Santino warned. "I figure you owed me one—here Ally, cover yourself up." He wrapped the large soft linen around her trembling frame.

Tanner's eyes narrowed. "I saw the kid."

"His name is Rios. We named him after a friend of ours."

"We named him after a friend of ours," Tanner mocked her and then quickly added, "Hell, the way you two act, should I have the maids add his and her monograms to your towels?"

"Tanner, stop this."

"Ally, don't waltz back in here and think everything is going to be easy, it's not. In fact, I plan to make it as tough as I can on you, starting right now." He grabbed her hand and stalked across the terrace, pursuing the left wing of the house.

"Let her go, Dorsey."

"The baby!" Ally squealed. "He'll get hungry."

"Believe it or not, your mom and brothers are kid-friendly. Newborns will get along fine with them. Besides, I plan to make babies a frequent habit around here."

"Tanner, stop this," she said, trying to wiggle free. "Damn it to hell, I just got here, for crying out loud." She tugged her arm free and he grabbed it again.

"And this means what to me?" He stopped in the hallway and wheeled around to glare at her.

"You can't do this, not with..." She tilted her head toward Santino but Santino only smirked now. At some point, Ally imagined she was left out in the cold on some kind of inside joke.

"Not with, what?" Tanner pursed his lips and jerked his head too, making it obvious he was tilting his head toward Santino. "You want us both. You want to keep us both. You don't want to choose."

You've told me more than once that I always get my way and yeah, I typically do but no thanks to you or Mr. Cool over there, seems this time it's what Ally wants, not what Tanner wants. This time, you get your way and it involves something I never expected to consider. In fact, I only made up my mind when I first saw you two together at the airport."

"Ah hell, Tanner. You were spying on us at the airport?"

Santino leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. He was probably enjoying the show.

Tanner's lips moved to her neck and he ripped her shirt from her body, tugging the wet layers away from her flushed skin. "Damn straight I was and I saw everything," he said, grinding against her, rubbing against every inch of her.

Santino grinned and his lips twitched, most likely from the same memory Ally now had. They had gone into the executive lounge of Franklin Airways and while the baby slept in the baby seat, they'd fooled around in a dark corner. Ally closed her eyes and thought of how hot and wet Santino kept her most of the damned time. When she opened her eyes again, she eyed Tanner and then Santino.

"You both make me fucking crazy!" She narrowed her eyes on Santino. "You knew he was there?"

"I suspected," he admitted.

"I was the old guy with the New York Times newspaper," he confessed.

"I hate your disguises."

"You used to love 'em and in fact, if you weren't so busy getting finger-fucked in a public place, you might have noticed me!"

She took a deep breath and let it out as he continued to scold her while stripping her clothes from her body. Santino watched, in obvious amusement. His dancing eyes and quirky little smile gave everything away.

"Tanner, this is really ridiculous," she said, slapping his hand away.

"No, loving two men and claiming to care for them equally is fucking insane. Tell me something, how are we supposed to deal with that? What would you do if you were in this position, huh? Would you let me keep two women? How about Mister Fertile over there? Huh? Would you want him to take another gal and yank her into bed with you?"

She shuddered. She didn't want to share Tanner. She refused to even entertain the idea of Santino with another woman. She loved them equally and needed each for various reasons, but Santino's dark side made her accept the fact that she was the only woman he would ever really love. A lot of it had to do with what she discovered about him when she profiled him. As an agent, she'd discovered more about the man than she'd ever revealed and she didn't believe he'd ever open up and talk about his past.

Brutalized as a child, Santino DeLuca was from an organized crime family that mistreated their children and then later put them to work in some of the worst of conditions. To escape, Santino killed his father and then worked for his mother's family as a hired gun. The man never formed lasting relationships—until Ally. For some reason, she was his weakness and he'd become hers.

Tanner's family life hadn't been much better. He didn't talk about his father much but Ally knew he despised him, whoever he was. Her men were like time bombs waiting to explode and a part of her knew if she didn't handle this delicate matter fairly, someone could get hurt. What had happened between Ally and Santino threatened to destroy them all.

"What do you say Santino, wanna go look for tramps?"

"I'll pass," he said, looking at Ally like he loved her more each second.

Tanner eased his hands around Ally's back. "You don't like the way that sounds do you, baby? Can't seem to wrap that dirty mind around the concept of three people going at it, unless of course, you choose the players, and you have, haven't you?" He unhooked her bra and then backed away from her just an inch.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" She'd been lost in the homecoming, in a moment like no other, practically contemplating a threesome when she saw the wicked look of decision on both their faces. Something was definitely going on, something twisted and delicious, an event they should've discussed with her.

"Lock that door, Santino."

With a lopsided smile, Santino eased over to the door and turned the latch. She heard it click and swallowed hard as understanding hammered into her chest. "You can't be serious."

"You think I'm kidding?" Tanner flipped the button on his denim jeans and then yanked the zipper down in record time. "Ally, you know me much better than that, don't you?"

"Santino?" Her voice made her sound like a croaking toad. "You're okay with this?"

His gaze burned her to the bone. "I'm game if you are."

"See how easy it is for everybody to follow Ally's requests? Unspoken, written, direct, we know what you're thinking before you do." He looped his arms around her hips. "We know what a woman like you needs, Ally. Now, we're going to give you precisely what it is you want."

"Tanner, this is not going to work out. You're far too possessive."

"And you took how long to decide this?"

"A lifetime."

"We haven't had a lifetime," Tanner snapped. He fell to his knees and peeled her white pants over trembling hips and thighs.

Santino moved in behind her and wrapped his strong arms around her body. "Come here, baby. Let him see you." His hands slid over hers and he smoothed his fingers over hers until he had hold of the lace. He gave the material a snap and the bra fell away from her breasts.

Santino's fingertips toyed with her nipples and he kissed her neck. "That's it, baby," he said in a soothing voice. "You'll be okay. Trust me. You're going to be just fine."

Tanner watched them, probably aroused and hurt by what he discovered—the familiarity of seasoned lovers.

"God, I must be crazy for sharing you." He kissed a knee and discarded the wet clothes. Using a towel, he rubbed each leg up and down before he patted her pussy. "I bet you're drenched there, aren't you honey?"

Oh and how right he was; she was soaking wet and knew precisely where to find relief. Tanner's long cock topped his shorts when he slid them halfway down his ass. He touched himself and licked at her folds, greedily parting her pussy lips with one or two sudden strokes. She braced for the pleasure, gripping Tanner's shoulders and Santino backed away from her, stripping in a corner all alone before he rejoined them in the center of the room.

Holding her back against his broad chest, he moved with them, grinding against her hip while Tanner's tongue set a determined pace. Her body unraveled under his hot mouth and he greedily fed from her, sipping at her juices while Santino twirled her nipples and made her come to terms with the new lust they both inspired.

Tanner was undoubtedly planning to make this work. He wasted little time proving he could take her to bed with Santino nearby.

With a hungry growl, Tanner glanced up and winked. "I'm not waiting. He's had his share of you, but me? I've done without."

An uncomfortable chuckle sounded out behind Ally and she reached over her back and touched Santino's jaw. With his index finger, he tilted her chin upward and to the left and he fucked her mouth with his, insinuating a slow screw with an erotic move only his tongue created.

Tanner's fingers snaked inside her channel. "You like the way he kisses you. I can tell. Fuck! I'm surprised there aren't sparks from this thing." He grinned against her mound and then kissed her clit, rolling his tongue over the hard nub before moving toward her breasts.

When Tanner stood in front of her, he lavished his attention on her breasts, pulling one nipple through his teeth until she moaned out, acknowledging the piercing pain, the divine way he manipulated her arousal.

"I could come without penetration," she assured them.

"No you won't," Santino promised her, smoothing his hands over her hips.

"I've missed you," she said, catching his cock in her hand and pumping his thick meaty dick through her closed hand.

"You want me, don't you, baby?" Tanner asked, cupping her vagina and fingering her.

"Both, I want both." She was breathing harder than a woman should breathe during foreplay. She sounded desperate. She stroked Tanner and reached behind her to stroke Santino too. She was panting, struggling to hold them both, dying to fondle each of them until they couldn't take it, until they agreed they wouldn't be able to do anything more than lay her down and love her.

Their hands were everywhere. Tanner was at the front and Santino at the back. Their hard bodies looked like something out of an adult magazine. Stout cocks extended forward, heavily veined with pre-cum topping each crest.

Tanner kissed his way down her neck and Santino whispered in her ear, "Are you ready for this?"

Tanner became aggressive. He'd definitely been without sex. Ally couldn't remember him being so impatient. Now, he was practically sprinting to the first finish. "Right here, baby," he growled. "You're going to fuck me right here and right now."

He fell against the bed and pulled her down on top of him. He tossed her arm over his shoulder and caught her breast in his mouth at the same time his cock entered her. "God, yeah, that's what I wanted."

Santino watched them fuck. Ally sat upright, straddled across Tanner, rubbing her clit against him as she danced over his body.

"That's it, baby, get yours too." Tanner smirked. "Damn, you're more beautiful than I remember." His hands covered her breasts and Santino closed his eyes.

Ally wondered if Santino was savoring the moment, or hiding from it. She licked her lips and bit down on her index finger, watching Tanner as he pushed himself inside her, trying to bury himself there.

Ally fingered her nipples. Tanner's eyes widened in surprise and he thrust harder inside her walls. "You like touching yourself, now?"

She smiled. "I like fucking period, Tanner," she said bravely, wondering if he could process her truths.

A carnal grunt fell from his lips and he grabbed her hips, shifting his weight. "If you wanna fuck, darlin', I'll make sure you don't ever get out of this bed again." He rolled over and tucked her under his body. Then he sank inside her and screwed the hell out of her.

"Let me feel you, baby. Good God, let me feel you."

Ally turned her head toward her lone audience and crooked her finger back and forth. Tanner's pace slowed. He turned his head and nuzzled her breast.

The men swapped glances but Santino stalked them, coming forward with a devious smile and a hard cock ready for a little dirty business."

"Hand jobs suck, don't they buddy?" Tanner asked.

Santino's dark demeanor held her in a trance. "I wouldn't know."

Tanner spread Ally's thighs wider. He fucked deeper, going hard for one or two more thrusts before he withdrew with an animalistic growl.

"Nothing but pure hell and sweet satisfaction is found in between that woman's legs," Tanner said, leaving the bed and rummaging through a nearby drawer.

Retrieving what he wanted, he came back to bed and set the small lube tube on the mattress. He was too excited, moving too fast for Ally to keep up now, but this was Tanner, this was the way he was, he never sat still long.

Tanner wouldn't fuck for hours, or take the time to focus on the important things in life. He'd promised to change, but what if he did? Would it change what she loved about him?

Santino, on the other hand, was a remarkable lover. He would fuck for hours and days on end. If she wanted him to stay between her legs, he'd fall asleep with his cock positioned at her pussy. In fact, that's generally the way they slept.

Together, they were dynamic in bed. And Ally knew that while she loved Tanner, she couldn't face life without Santino. Yes, it was sexual. Yes, it was physical, but it was so fucking erotic that she couldn't explain the best parts even to herself.

She loved him until it hurt. She ached for him until she felt wounded.

Santino was her life, her reason for being able to exist. Tanner was her heart, her reason for making it this far.

Santino motioned for Ally and she came to her knees. He slanted his mouth over hers. "I gotta do

this, you know," he said, explaining himself to Tanner. "Ally likes having her ass spanked."

Tanner growled. "You think I don't know that? Who do you think smacked it first?"

"Boys, behave," she said, appreciating the friendly competition as long as they kept things civil.

She positioned herself on her knees and pressed down on her palms, raising her hips like a formal presentation. "Two strong and able men and neither one of you are man enough to spank me?"

"I'll show you man enough," Tanner promised, rubbing his dick over the crease of her ass.

Santino's hand rippled across her bottom with a slap-slap-slap. He smoothed his hand over her globe and repeated the same smacking pattern again. His hand set her pussy on fire.

"More, give me more." She whined, arched, and wanted to purr and scratch. She was in position, might as well play the part.

"I'll give you more, sugar." Santino fisted his cock. "Come here and suck my dick, baby."

"Sweet," she whispered, licking the crest.

Tanner smacked her butt. "You can suck his cock but don't you move this ass."

She licked the top of Santino's dick, sliding her tongue over the thick veins pressing through his taunt skin. "So good," she hummed, licking and sucking him.

"Tell Tanner how much you like my dick in your cheek," he teased, pushing through her jaws, sliding over her tongue.

The unsettling way he watched her while she took him in her mouth made her pussy clench with pure need. She dragged her tongue over his slit, tasting the salty musk of a man ready to come.

Tanner rubbed himself against her. His hands propelled across her hips and trailed down her sides. He raised a hand to her, smacked her, spanked her.

She whimpered against Santino's cock.

"That's it, Ally," Santino crooned. "Suck it for me, doll. Give me head, sugar."

A controlled lover, Santino didn't come without warning. He didn't just lose it unexpectedly but today, he would. He was harder and he was fucking her throat like he might fuck her cunt.

He pulled her hair, something he did a lot when he didn't have the capacity to resist her. And she craved the taste of him. She wanted him to press her closer to his groin until she swallowed the stout evidence of a well satisfied man.

Licking around Santino's crest, sucking the wide mushroom head, she nuzzled Santino's erection and pressed her hips against Tanner's cock. "Somebody start fucking or else I swear, I'll finger myself."

Tanner's finger provided a first warning. He dipped around the entrance he wanted to claim, making sure she was moist enough to accept him. "Damn, does she order you around like this all the time?" he asked, grinning at Santino.

"Pretty much, yeah," Santino confirmed.

Tanner bit her butt cheek and then smacked her ass once more. "We're going to have to work on that."

Santino concealed his body with hers, dragging her in between them. And as if the two men had simultaneously fucked her a thousand times, they both slid into her two tight spaces at one time.

"Sweet mercy hell!" she cried out.

Tanner thrust inside but Santino withdrew, giving her room and searching her eyes. "You okay?"

She gulped and nodded, tears starting down her cheeks. "No, you're not okay." He withdrew another inch or two and Tanner stopped immediately.

"What's wrong, baby?" Tanner kissed her shoulder.

"I'm...just...happy."

Santino chuckled. "Nice try, but that's not it. We're hurting you. There's no rush here. We can take this thing slow."

She closed her eyes and tried to withstand the pain. "Just wait. Don't either of you move." She focused on the men inside her, deliberately squeezing her ass cheeks and then pulsing around Santino's shaft, encouraging him to sink deeper inside her pussy.

"One more minute," she said when they both started to thrust.

Again, she tried to adjust, let them stretch her. Then, all bets were off.

Tanner smacked her rear and she cried out as a hot shot of electrified pleasure zipped through her womb. "That's my girl," he bragged, fucking her ass.

She drew from the independent strengths discovered in both men. She squeezed and released one cock and then another as she tried to sway with and against their bodies.

"Fuck me," she whimpered and they did. Holy sweet mercy, did they ever fuck her every which way her body willingly moved.

"That's my woman," Santino said, watching her come for them.

"No," Tanner corrected him. "She's *our* woman, *our* girl."

## Chapter Seventeen

Santino sat down with the little one in his arms. Rios watched his mother braid Molly's hair. She didn't have a lot to say to Ally but that was okay, it would pass.

Molly studied the little boy and touched his fingers. "He's teeny-weeny."

"Yes, he is, but you're kind of cute and teeny-weeny, too," Santino remarked.

She pulled her hand back and then looked up at Ally. "Who is he?" Her meek voice was barely understandable as she mumbled into her mother's shirt.

"His name is Santino."

Santino winked at Ally.

"Is he fam-i-ly?" she inquired, attempting to say the word correctly.

Santino flinched. Ally smiled and caressed his cheek. "Yes, he's fam-i-ly." The little girl smiled and then touched the same place on Santino's cheek before she jumped down from Ally's lap.

Santino watched her run across the terrace. "You're doing the right thing by taking things slow with her. If you push, she'll back away and you don't have a guarantee that she'll return with the same eagerness to get to know you as what you see now."

"You think she's eager?"

"Well, as much as a little girl can be right now."

"How'd you get to be so smart about kids?" She instantly regretted asking him because she understood he had plenty of pain in his past. She didn't want to dredge up memories he didn't want to revisit.

"I'm learning as I go. I'm trying the same approach with women." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I love you, Ally."

She winked. "I hope so. Are you okay with everything here?"

Santino took a deep breath and watched as Darren and David helped their mother into a nearby chair in the dining room. Holly and Molly chased one another through the foyer with 'winged' Barbies and Tanner stood on the edge of the lawn photographing something—or rather someone—Ally. He took a deep breath and finally his lips spread into a wide smile. "Yeah, I think I am. I'm really okay with this."

\* \* \* \*

Ally and Tanner tucked the girls in bed and she peeked in on Rios. The baby's room adjoined Mrs. Thacker's room and she didn't feel comfortable with it but monitors were placed in the rooms she'd share with Tanner and Santino. After she kissed Rios goodnight, she slipped into her room with Santino and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Ally, don't explain this, you don't have to tell me what goes on when you're alone with him."

"I know."

He sat up, swinging those long legs over the side of the bed. He encouraged her to sit on his lap and pressed his erection against her bottom.

This was where she had a foreseeable problem. After her six-week check-up with the doctor, she'd returned to normal sexual activities and those with Santino were high-energy, to say the least. He cradled her in a tight hug and stroked her hair.

"So what do your brothers say about this unusual arrangement?"

"I'm surprised they haven't told you. They've had a pretty strong voice about it." She shifted her weight and then faced him, straddling his cock in an effort to slowly grind against him, dying to tempt him into a round of love-making before she deserted him for the night.

"Ally?"

She kissed him lightly on the lips and then looked down. Snapping the waistband of his pajama pants,

she freed him from his clothing, dragging his erection through the front pocket of his boxers. She pumped the weight of his cock into her steady hand.

"Ah, baby girl. You're going to find yourself in a whole lot of trouble here."

"I can't go to him until I know you're satisfied." She slanted her lips over his and he slid his hand on top of hers to stop her from driving him to the brink of male madness.

"Ally, you don't have to please us both night after night. I've brought you back to him and he's waited a long time for a night alone with you and I understand."

She shook off his hand and dropped her head to his belly, placing feather-light kisses around his stomach. Tears fell against his skin and she choked back what she wanted to say, needed to tell him, but didn't dare.

"You're okay, Ally. You belong with both of us and I realized it long before you accepted it." He caressed her open back with the pads of his fingertips.

"And what if you're wrong?" She'd had a full afternoon to think about it. She realized she belonged with Santino. She knew how she felt about him, and from the get-go, he'd known how he felt about her. It was easy with them. Nothing with Tanner was ever easy.

He stopped moving his hand and held her flat against his chest with his palm resting between her shoulder blades. "I'm not," he whispered.

A few minutes passed and Ally felt like she could fall asleep. She closed her eyes and hugged him tighter. "We're going to be fine," she mumbled. "Just fine," she said again. "Everything that is supposed to work out will work out in the end," she said again. Holding him only tighter and tighter with each passing thought she voiced. She wept and her body started to need him in a way only a lover could.

"Okay, that's it." Using both hands, he forced her to release him. After a throaty groan, he stood, shook out his pants and slipped into them even with the obvious problems—his erection and her mouth watering because of the fact.

He sat next to her again and she immediately rose to her knees and took a position behind him, pressing her lips to his neck and massaging his shoulders. He patted the bed. "Ally, come here."

"Give me a minute," she mumbled.

"Now, baby," he demanded.

"I love it when you talk dirty to me," she whispered, licking the tiny hairs at his nape.

"Damn it!" He stood up again. "Knock it off." He walked across the room and turned the overhead light on, ruining the set romantic mood the lone lamp in the room provided.

Exasperated, Ally fell flat against the bed and glared at the bubble ceiling, irked because she had nothing better to do at that particular moment. "How about a quickie? Then, I'll go to him."

"You will?"

"Yes, I will."

"Maybe he doesn't want my leftovers tonight. Did you stop and think about that?"

"He didn't have a problem with it before."

"Who?"

"Him," she said, waving her hand toward the door.

"Him-who?" he asked, narrowing his gaze.

She swallowed hard and bit down on her lower lip.

"Ally? What the hell is going on here?" He shook her shoulders and stared into her eyes. "You can't even say his name tonight. What's this about?"

She bowed her head. "I don't love him anymore."

Santino looked like the wind was knocked out of him when he heard her confession. "Have you told him?"

"No."

"Don't."

"Why?" Her lip quivered even though she tried to prevent herself from showing such weakness. She fought like a man, drew a gun with as much skill as any man she'd ever fought beside, and she did not weep like an overgrown baby, but lately she'd have a tough time convincing anyone of *that*.

"It's a bad idea right now. For starters, you're tired. Look at everything you've been through over the last year and tell me you've had an average year. For that matter, tell me when you remember having one day of normalcy. Just one full day where you didn't feel torn between two men, two or three separate lives, a career you love and a man whose way of life prevented you from having everything you wanted. One day, Ally."

She grabbed his hand and placed it in the middle of her breasts. "I love you. You, Santino and only you."

"You'll love me tomorrow when you return to my bed. Nothing will change between us." He pulled her to him. "Ally, I'm going to spend my life taking care of you and that boy of ours." He grinned when he mentioned Rios.

"Would you love me enough to marry me?"

"Ally don't ask such questions, not right now." He closed his eyes and touched her face.

"Look at me," she whispered. "Would you marry me, Santino Deluca?"

He pursed his lips and opened his eyes. "What do you think?"

"Then, you'll become my husband and forsake all others until death do us part?"

"Ally, what are you running from, here?" He narrowed his gaze. "That's the problem isn't it? You're afraid someone else might take your place in my bed. That's what this is about, isn't it?"

"Answer the question."

"You're proposing?"

"Yes, I am."

"To me?"

"Yes."

"And what about Tanner?"

"Do you want me to take that as a 'no' or are you going to think on it?"

\* \* \* \*

No, he wasn't going to think on it. He was going to love the thought straight out of the woman's mind. She was running scared. There were too many feelings involved. Too much standing in the way of complete happiness and marriage didn't solve their problems. It wouldn't make things easier for her, or him, for that matter.

"Answer me, damn you!"

"No," he replied, easing away from his pants. "Love me."

Before she could resist him, think more of her question than the carnal acts of pleasure, he pulled her pajama pants over her hips and dropped them on the floor. He started at her ankle and kissed her calf and knee before his tongue trailed closer and closer to her slick folds.

"Santino, please love me enough."

"Shh, Ally. I do." He pressed his lips against her clit and sucked in hard breath, twirling his tongue straight into her wet, tight channel. She gripped the bed sheets in her closed fists and arched to meet him as he tongue-fucked her into a state of confusion. He wanted to keep her there for as long as possible.

"Please marry me," she whimpered.

Harder he lapped at her center, blowing steady streams of hot air over her sex and going crazy with the ideas of Ally spending time with another man—Tanner or anyone else—without him near by to supervise. Oh, how he adored her, how he indulged in moments like this, loving her. His finger slipped inside her rear, parting her ass with a scissor-like motion. He fingered her cunt and ass at the same time.

"Oh God! That feels so hot." Her thighs closed against his cheeks and he continued to fuck her with fingers and tongue, pressing her closer to an orgasm and then dropping back just enough to keep the best part for himself.

His cock throbbed. He burned at the base. He had to get inside her. He needed to hold and caress her. He needed to stroke her, fuck her wild like they used to do when it was just the two of them. He rose over her and her legs parted.

"That's my baby," he whispered, positioning the head of his cock at her entrance. He didn't wait. He couldn't slow down.

Santino wanted her coming with him, thrashing against his body as he buried himself inside her, touching her in places only he could reach and claiming that part of her that forever belonged to him—her heart.

Her legs were hot and limber. She latched her ankles behind his waist, rocking with him in acceptance of every thrust.

Ally watched him enter her. "Don't stop, Santino. Fuck me. Make me feel you."

Beads of sweat poured from his brow. No, he wasn't going to stop, he was going to fuck her all over this damned room, this fucking house. Maybe even in Tanner's bed, too. Then, he'd know, Ally would know, everyone there would believe—Ally was his woman. His, by God!

He held her hips, dropped his head, nipped at her nipple and screwed her little snatch until she cried out in pleasure. "Like it right like this, don't you, darlin'?"

Her mouth opened and then closed again, her eyes hazy, dreamy-like. Oh damn, he hit the spot only he had the right to claim. It was the one they'd worked to find together time and time again. He knew her body so well that he could pinpoint it on a fucking map. "Come, Ally, one more time, sugar."

He tweaked her nipple and sipped at her lips. His hands clasped hers and he moved his hips up and down shifting quick enough to rock nations, change climates, and bring on the most violent storms.

"That's it, sweet baby. Lock that tight little snatch around my cock." A few minutes more and he came hard and fast. "Milk my cock, baby, tighter...damnation, you can squeeze a release right out of a man."

She screamed. She would lose the orgasm she wanted to take if she didn't grab hold and ride him. She clawed his arms and back, throwing her legs over his shoulders.

"Quiet, Ally," Santino said, nuzzling her.

Her hips gave. Her body undulated and the last fall was worth it all. "Santino! Don't leave me." He stifled her screams by smothering her lips with his, but he thrust inside her screwing her hard, taking her everywhere she wanted to go, and pampering her sweet willing pussy until she writhed in pleasure. Then, he collapsed on top of her with a sated sigh.

"I love you, Ally," he said. "I will forever love only you."

\* \* \* \*

Tanner walked in on them in the middle of their fucking. He saw the way Ally screwed a man who barely knew anything about her and he was green with envy, but he understood what he saw. At least, he told himself he was going to try and make sense of it all. When she slipped into his room an hour later, she smelled like fresh rose petals and her hair was still damp from the shower.

"Hey, you," he said, tossing away the book he pretended to read.

She slid in beside him. "Hey, yourself."

"What took you so long? I was expecting you two hours ago. Did Rios wake up?"

She froze against him. He pulled her into a tight bear hug, one that should've been familiar but because of the distance between them, felt oddly

uncomfortable. "Rios?" She glanced up and then shook her head.

At least she wasn't going to lie to him. He kissed the top of her head and then shifted his weight so he could sit over her, confine her in a way that made her look him in the eyes. His knees were on either side of her waist and she was propped up against the headboard.

"So, I'm dying here, waiting to spend time with the woman I want to spend the rest of my life loving and you make me wait another two hours. What were you doing?" He kissed her softly on the lips and then studied her face.

"Tanner..."

"Ally..."

"This isn't like old times. This isn't something I'm going to discuss with you because you tell me to do it."

He rolled his lips inward and literally bit on his lower one to keep from picking an argument. His effort failed almost immediately.

"Damn it, Ally, I'm trying to understand here. I'm trying to make things so easy for you, a walk on the beach or whatever."

"You always have such a great way with words."

"Yeah, and a great fondness for the truth, which I used to always get from you."

"I'm tired, and you're looking for an argument."

"What took you two hours, Ally? We put the girls down and you were right behind me, or so I thought."

She pursed her lips. "Forget it. I'm here now."

He didn't know how. He'd seen with his own eyes how wild they were together, how Santino had held her legs apart, watched as her orgasm took her into a new realm of pure, indecent pleasure. No, a man didn't put those images out of his mind.

"I was with Santino."

Tanner's lips twitched and he went in for the kill. "What were you doing?"

She set her jaw and narrowed her eyes, her cute little mad expression was just about ready to emerge. He could sense it, almost taste it. He wanted her fury to spike, there were a lot of issues they needed to fight their way through. He was ready for a good Tanner-Ally battle. They ended with flaming hot sex, or at least a few of them did.

"Get off me, Tanner."

"Oh, I'm going to get off, but no, I am not getting off *of you*."

"Then I can scream my head off and you can face the consequences."

He jerked against her threat only because he was hurt, shocked even. "And who the hell do you think will come running down this hallway to save you? Santino?"

He tilted her chin and looked directly in her eyes. "Ally, what were you doing with Santino that was so damned important that it couldn't wait until morning?" He moved his hand across her breast and down her stomach. "I can feel and check. There are some heat levels so hot that defying the temperature, even after true boiling points are reached, prove damned near impossible, especially those from freshly fucked women."

She twisted her mouth. "In this relationship, I can do whatever I want with him and with you."

"You're right," he agreed. "But if this is going to work, we can't have secrets between us." He untied the ribbon on her sexy lingerie camisole, running his fingers over the silky smooth skin underneath but not pushing her too far.

"I'm really tired, Tanner."

He took a deep breath and let it out. He jumped out of bed and walked over to the sitting area. He stretched his legs out in front of him and propped them up on the coffee table. "Tell me something, Ally, will he always come first with you now?"

She didn't know. For this to work, she hoped not. For now, yeah, he did. She said nothing.

"Okay, fine. Don't answer that but while you were over there fucking him like he was the only man with the right damned equipment to get the job done, I was here planning. I was trying to think of all the ways I can show you how much I love you, trying to come up with where to start so I could tell you what you missed day by day in the lives of our girls." He stood up, walked to a dresser and pulled out a journal from the top drawer. "Here, take it." He handed the book to her.

"What is this?"

"It should be everything you missed while you weren't with Molly and Holly along with a bunch of silly love letters from me, but those aren't as important as the photographs. There are two for each day you missed with them.

Ally took the book. Pages and pages of letters and pictures, snapshots of precious moments she missed, drawings from the girls, and tender sweet poems from a man clearly distraught without her. "Oh, Tanner. I don't know what to say."

"Say you love me and if you can't say it honestly, then say you'll at least give me the same chance you gave DeLuca." He slid next to her and took her hands. "Ally, we've only been intimate a few times but I know a love like ours doesn't slip away. It's not the kind of love easily forgotten and honey, it's not based on sex."

"So you met someone else, you have a kid with him, you care about him, but you don't have a lifetime of memories with him. I have those. I have them in here." He took her hand and covered his heart with her palm before moving his hand to her chest. "And you have them, too."

Her eyes filled with tears. He cupped the side of her face and stroked them away as they fell. "Baby, what we have goes beyond lust. Oh yeah, I'm horny as hell when I'm around you because your body drives a man like me crazy."

She glanced down and saw for herself exactly what he meant. Sure enough, tented pants.

"It's been that way for over a year now," he told her. "Ally, I love you. And sure, just like Santino, I'm going to want a piece of your pretty little ass pretty much all the time. Like any good man, I'll do whatever it takes to keep you fuck-minded and bend-over-ready."

"Very funny, Tanner." At least she'd have his corny jokes to keep her entertained.

His expression changed in an instant and seriousness loomed. He took her hand in his. He kissed her lightly on her eyelids before he kissed her lips. He took the time to stroke her mouth with the pad of his thumb as he whispered into his lingering kiss, "Ally, I'm the man who will sit next to your bed should times get bad. That's my place, Ally. Not his, mine."

"Don't ask me to choose, Tanner," she said.

"I won't. Right now, he'd win. In the end, you'll be glad you didn't declare either of us the winner. We're going to make this work. I swear it. Do you trust me, Ally?"

She trusted only one man completely—Santino. He always came through, especially when she needed him most. The question was, did she have room in her heart for Tanner too? After seeing what lengths he'd taken to express his love, she was relieved when she realized, she probably still loved him.

## Chapter Eighteen

Tanner went to bed horny and woke up at three o'clock in the morning in the same shape. To make matters worse, the baby monitor was blaring with the sounds of a baby wanting too much attention in the wee hours of the morning. Where was that damned Mrs. Thacker when someone needed her?

He rolled over and started to wake Ally but remembered she wasn't breast feeding and decided it wouldn't hurt him to try and find a bottle. Mrs. Thacker had said something about keeping the formula in the refrigerator. He'd figure it out. He was a smart man, a father to two beautiful little girls. A baby boy couldn't be that difficult.

Grabbing a robe, he tied it in front and cursed at the tent in his pants. Ally had been home for less than twenty-four hours and he'd fucked her once. He hated to think about how many times Santino had taken her to bed. If he had the good sense God gave him, he'd go wake Santino up and tell him his child was wailing. The kid had lungs like his mom.

"I'm coming, damn it." He didn't think about the monitors now. He just wanted the baby whining to cease altogether.

As he leaned over the crib, staring up at him was a boy with beautiful black eyes. He kicked his feet and smiled at Tanner as soon as he realized his screaming fit earned him company. "So you like a lot of attention, do you?" He patted the boy on the stomach and the little one kicked his feet again and cooed before his lower lip dropped.

Tanner reached in and pulled him from the crib. He immediately held him out at arm's length. "Jeepers, kiddo. Did you pee a river or a lake?" He wanted to scream for the nanny now more than ever before but he glanced at the clock and decided it

wasn't worth it. He could change a diaper, clean him up, and change him into something more comfortable.

"Rios?" Tanner tried to talk in a tone he imagined a baby might like. "It appears we have a dilemma on our hands." He looked around for the diapers and located the rack of disposable diapers and chose two. Surely he wouldn't need to wear more than two.

Well, maybe three since the kid peed so much it soaked his pajamas. "All right, now, let's see here." Tanner looked around for a change of clothing. "Tell you what, let's get you cleaned up, changed, and then we'll figure out where your dry clothes are. How about it?"

Little Rios grinned. "Are you smiling at me? I think you are." He pinched the little one's cheeks and then kissed his forehead. "You're one lucky kid, I'll give you that. Don't tell your dad I said this, or God forbid, those uncles of yours, but you do look a whole lot like David when he was a kid. I've seen the pictures. This means, of course, that your grandma is going to be extremely partial to you and..." Tanner stopped talking when he saw Ally standing in the doorway.

"I didn't want to interrupt you, since you were having such a heart to heart conversation with Rios."

"I see. Did it occur to you that I never changed diapers?"

"No, I guess you didn't."

"We had potty pants by the time the girls arrived here. Lord, what a chore that was."

"I remember." Ally giggled.

"Well, it's all detailed in your journal. When you take the time, you should read it. There are some verbatim quotes you don't want to miss with Molly and David."

"I bet it makes for some interesting reading."

"Best seller material," he assured her.

Ally tousled the little twigs of dark hair. "He's going to have coal black hair."

"He's really something, Ally." Tanner said softly, handing him to her. She held him out in much the same way Tanner did and carried him over to the changing station.

"He's really soaking wet, too."

"Yes, I noticed that right off the bat." Tanner sat down in the rocking chair and began rocking back and forth. He watched the woman he loved with a child who should've been his. For a second, the truth stung him a bit.

"Ally, have you been happy with your life?"

Startled by the question, she glanced over her shoulder. "I guess I've been happy enough, at times. Then...things changed, that's all." She must've deliberately stopped herself from rubbing salt in the wound and continued to work with diapers, snaps, and baby wipes.

"Then, you fell in love with him?"

She nodded.

"And he makes you happy?"

"He makes me happy." She didn't turn to see if the reaction hurt Tanner. Instead, she grabbed a bottle from the mini-refrigerator and placed it in the microwave. When the timer went off, she tested the formula temperature by sprinkling it over her wrist and then gave the nipple to Rios. Immediately, he closed his eyes and started to indulge in his early morning meal.

"Were you ever scared or did you ever feel unsafe?"

Ally swayed her arms from side to side cradling Rios. "Santino always makes me feel safe and secure."

"It's where I failed you, isn't it?"

"Tanner, don't do this to yourself." Ally looked down at Rios and then said, "He's asleep. Can you believe this? He gets us up and then goes straight to sleep once we're wide awake."

"Smart kid."

"Shh...get out of here. He'll go down once and then get back up for one final stab at staying awake."

"Or maybe it's a last effort to keep his mother close." Tanner smiled and then slid a kiss on her cheek. "I'll see you in the morning."

"What?" She looked surprised when she faced him.

"Ally, you're my heart, nothing is going to change that but I don't want to force something you don't want right now. Go back to Santino. You'll rest better if you feel safe." He winked, smiled, and started to shut the door behind him, but not before adding, "I'll be around tomorrow. We'll read some of the journal entries to the girls. They love to hear stories about themselves. They're like their daddy."

\* \* \* \*

Ally rocked Rios long after he gave up the baby struggle of keeping one-eye-open. His little fingers curled around Ally's ring finger and for some reason, it made her stop and think of how quickly everything had changed for her and for Tanner.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes as she tried to revisit the interrupted island wedding Tanner once planned for them. They'd waited a long time to celebrate their love and in an instant, everything changed. A few more moments, days of separation, and lives were forever altered.

Ally sighed as she laid her baby over on the soft fluffy comforters. In a matter of a few short months, her feelings had changed, deepened, and then reversed in similar order. It was hard for her to understand how or what had happened to change them. The only thing she knew with absolute certainty was that she loved Santino and she was remembering the reasons, all of the reasons why she loved Tanner too.

Santino must've known she'd find her way back to Tanner and apparently the fear of it was what made her run straight back to Santino. She didn't

want to lose what they had, the way he made her feel.

She turned off the overhead light, rechecked the monitor, and slid out of the room. She was going to revisit the past. She was going to remember the love. Tanner hadn't forgotten. Why had she? Or did she protect herself the only way she knew how at the time? Was it easier to look for love somewhere else than to focus on what should've been, could've been, would've been...if only.

She passed by the room she would share with Santino. "No regrets," she whispered on her way to join Tanner. She had two beautiful little girls she wouldn't have if it wasn't for the love she shared with Tanner. Thanks to the love she experienced with Santino, she had a handsome little boy.

Santino never promised her anything, but he continually gave her precious gifts. Actually, he gave her plenty of them. He'd given her a child, he'd saved her life more than once, and he'd given her the opportunity to revisit the life she'd built with Tanner.

Regardless of the obstacles ahead, past experiences proved Tanner's endearing love never wavered, never failed. Santino's love was strong enough to carry her through, regardless of what the future held for all of them.

\* \* \* \*

Ally locked the door and slipped out of her pajamas. She tiptoed toward the bed and tripped over her own feet. "Ouch!"

Tanner immediately flipped the switch and the dim light from the small lamp provided plenty of light for the purpose. He stared at her blankly before it registered that yes, she was nude and yes, he should move his ass because she apparently hurt herself as she tried to play the part of sexy seductress.

Doubled over, Ally cursed her own clumsy nature. Of all the times for her to trip over her own feet, she had to do it when Tanner was there to watch with three eyes keenly focused. Two held pure lust and

the one pressing through the small opening in his shorts, nothing but the evidence of pre-excitement.

"Are you okay?"

God, she hoped so because so help her, right now wasn't the time to stop this and with Tanner's cock hanging from his boxers, there was only one thing left to do. Drop on down to her knees.

Ally slumped to the floor and took Tanner's shorts with her. If there was one thing she did well with Tanner, it was suck his cock. A lot of it was because she'd been a virgin when Tanner had first taken her and in anticipating the day, she'd read up a lot on the act of performing oral sex. She wanted to be sure she did that better than anyone else because

Tanner Dorsey had enjoyed his share of blow jobs, or at least, she'd always thought he had. Before her first time with Tanner, she'd tried to imagine what it would be like to have him swell in her hand, slide across her tongue and press against the back of her throat.

Ally licked her lips right at the tip. She didn't tap the end or swipe the pre-cum off the end. Instead, she teased, allowed him to know she was close enough to do the job but still determined enough to resist the urge.

"Damn, I sure hope you fall a lot," he said, grinning from ear to ear.

She wrapped her hand around his length, pulling the layers of skin up and over the tip. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I like anything you do, Ally." Tanner tweaked her nipple and then dropped to the floor right along with her.

"Hey now, this is my show. I wanted you standing up."

"Now that's too damned bad, isn't it? I've wanted inside that hot little pussy for so long that you aren't going to tease me, not now. Tease me later." He nipped at her lower lip. "Love me like you did, Ally. Love me as much as you loved me before." His kisses

lingered across her mouth. Slowly he caressed her mouth with his parted lips teasing as his hands became part of her skin, tracing every curve when he pushed her against the floor.

He towered over her and crawled down her body with an open mouth, placing light pecks here and there, licking his way to her mound. She arched, bracing for his attention, the oral affection she couldn't wait to receive.

She rotated her hips forward, preparing for Tanner's tongue. Only he rolled back on the balls of his feet and watched. He bit his lip, shook his head, and simply said, "That's so beautiful, Ally."

Her skin was hot, like she ran the highest of fevers and his words sparked the gauge one degree higher. "You still make me crazy." He did, and now that she was with him again, she somehow realized he always would.

His mouth covered her pussy and he lapped at her folds, sipped them in and suckled her flesh. Mumbling against her heat, he found his way into the dripping heat of her desire.

"Tanner," she whispered, raking her fingers through his hair.

He looked up. "Tell me, Ally. What is it that you like? What do you enjoy?" He rubbed his cock up and down her inner thigh. "What do you want, Ally? Do you want me inside of you fucking my cock against that hot little pussy or do you want my fingers, or maybe my lips?"

Her index finger was at her mouth, she bit down, making a decision, or at least trying to come up with a sensible solution. She wanted all of the above. Had he given her that option?

Tanner placed his palms flat against the floor, one on each side of her head. God, she'd love to have those mirrors they had at the yacht because Tanner had the best looking backside of any man alive. He sucked the finger lingering over her mouth and then

flicked the tip with his tongue, kissing away the barriers between them.

A drop of his heat sizzled against her skin and that was pretty much the deciding factor, once Ally felt him. She rose hard and fast, encouraging an immediate entry. "Good Lord, Tanner," she moaned as she wrapped her feet around his back.

"You're going to have hellish carpet burns." He yanked her up, fell against the bed and pulled her into a seated position.

"I like you on top. Then, I can see those pretty little nipples smiling at me."

"They don't smile," she argued, placing her hands behind her head and enjoying the feel of him.

Biting down on one erect point, he proved her wrong. He rolled her nipple around his tongue, sucking her between his lips. "Told you." Growling, he nodded toward his accomplishment and she didn't bother to compliment him on a job well done. Her nipples pleaded for more attention but her pussy drove them to a level of profound urgency.

Soon after she began moving with Tanner's cock, their bodies rocked together. Tanner was the one man who knew how to help her find a quick delicious sexual tune, that precise in and out rhythm engaged by a soft erotic beat. The slapping of bodies reminded of one important point—they shared a love that would forever strum along.

Ally fucked Tanner. She imagined him being lost and finding his place in her, in their moment.

His cock twitched inside her walls and she used her thighs, squeezing him as she rode him. She slid all the way up, topping his dick and then fell over him again, succumbing to the climax building and building. Her heat smothered his cock and he buried himself deeper, screwing himself tightly into her cunt. He buried himself deep inside her pussy and took her hips in his loving hands.

"Come to me, Ally. Come back to me," he whispered. A jolt of his release filled her and she fell apart in his arms, just as he crumbled against her. "I wish we could've stayed this way forever," he mumbled. "You're my girl, Ally. You'll always be my girl."

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, they were back at it. Sitting up, his back against the bed, Tanner fondled her breasts, drawing a nipple to his lips. He eyed the connection formed between them, watching his dick enter her and retreat.

Good Lord, she orchestrated one wild ride and he couldn't help but feel the difference in her, the controlled way she fucked him. One second she was untamed, unleashing lust-filled moves and the very next, she kissed him passionately and there was no doubt about it—they were making slow and easy love.

He watched with sweet hellish satisfaction as her head rolled back and her strawberry-blonde hair whipped around her shoulders. "Come for me, Ally." He gripped her thighs, spreading her wide and watching, quite mesmerized, the joining of bodies. "Give me some of that sugary heat, baby."

"Tanner...don't talk."

He smirked. "Ah, but that's what you like best about me—my mouth." He stole a kiss, pumped inside her and they fucked harder and harder while their foreheads pressed together and their mouths were separated, held only a kiss away.

"Good God, Tanner!" she cried out, her hips really moving. She thrust against him and he felt her jerk, resist, and jerk again.

He was going to shoot off like a fucking jet. He cupped her neck, still parted his lips and anticipated the moment when he would kiss her. His intent focus was on her. He waited for her body to unravel with the evidence of a hotter, smoldering heat, for her skin to blush with pleasure, for the ache of that long

awaited ride to fly in and capture the spirit of a woman, his woman.

"Tanner, more!" She puckered for the kiss.

He watched her lips search for his and he eyed those pretty little gems. He pressed his thumb against her clit and cried out, "Now, ride me, Ally."

"God, that's good. Damn, right there...oh, Tanner, come!"

"Ah, that's it, this is what I remember," he whispered, falling against her and smothering the screams of pleasure with a kiss meant to seal the unruly ravaging of a desirous woman.

Tanner loved the hell out of her hunger. There was plenty there to find. He sipped her lips and twirled his tongue with hers, insinuating the precise way they continued to fuck. "You're so sweet, Ally. That's what you are, you know? You're so incredibly sweet."

She milked him for every inch he was worth and in his opinion, there was a lot of value found in his cock. Whenever Ally was riding on top, his balls weighed in with explosive benefits.

\* \* \* \*

Ally cloaked his body with hers. After their breathing returned to normal, Tanner kissed the top of her head. "I love you, Ally."

She propped her chin on her hands and looked up at him. "I asked him to marry me."

His eyes narrowed and he looked profoundly confused, and quite hurt. He took her arms and gently unlocked the grip she had around his waist. Finding his pajama pants, he stepped into them and strolled around the room like he wanted to run but had no where specific to go. Finally, he unlocked the door. "The girls will probably run in here when they wake up."

"Did you hear me?"

"What do you want me to say to that, Ally?" he snapped.

"Maybe ask me why?"

"I know why."

"No, you don't." She touched his arm and he shrugged her off.

"Goodnight, Ally," he said, lying down next to her and giving her a cold shoulder.

She sat upright on the bed. "I'm not picking a fight with you. I want you to understand what I'm feeling."

"I understand."

"No, you don't!"

"What don't I understand, then?" He rolled over on his side and faced her.

"How I feel about you and why, how I feel about him and why; there are a lot of complications here, things that can't be undone. Things none of us can take back."

"Marrying a man you've known for less than a year might present a few more problems, Ally. I have to be honest. I can't have you living under my roof as *his* wife. In fact, I still hope one day you'll love me enough to become my wife regardless of how you feel about him."

"Tanner, you caused this mass confusion!"

"Yeah, I did and it damn well saved your life."

"You knew he was the kind of man that—"

"That what, Ally? That you couldn't resist him?"

She froze. Oh shit. Oh fucking shit, she thought. Everything made sense then. She recalled some of their love-making, some of the times they were in bed together. Santino and Tanner said 'good damn' and it was a phrase few people used. Then there were so many other physical characteristics and personality traits. Oh God, no. That couldn't be right. They just shared similarities, that's all. She pushed aside a passing thought.

"I hired the best man for the job and that would've been the end of the story if you hadn't gotten so attached!"

"You knew him, Tanner. I didn't. You knew the kind of man Santino was and you realized—because

you know me so well—I'd have a difficult time resisting him because he would remind me of you!"

"He should! He's my half-brother."

She gasped. "He's what?" Oh she was pissed and the anger building might damned well reach dimensions neither of them ever witnessed. "Oh, dear God." Ally rolled over and hit the floor. She ran to the side wall and hit the overhead light switch at once. "How could that be?"

"We have the same low-down father."

"You mean, you and Santino had the same dad that Santino killed?"

"Oh yeah, that," he said, waving a dismissive hand. "Well, the bastard kind of got what he had coming to him, didn't he?"

"Tanner..."

"Ally, I'm not man enough to have some of the conversations you're going to want to have with me about this. I'm not going to discuss the past and I may not even discuss the future right now. I'm kind of pissed off, I imagine you understand why."

"Fine, have it your way. If you won't discuss this with me, I know someone who will." She grabbed her robe.

"Ever wonder why he knew exactly where to touch you? How to treat you? What you liked?"

She stopped at the door.

"Didn't you ever think some of the things he knew about you were just a little too convenient?"

Ally clutched her collar. "You both have played me since the beginning."

"No, Ally. I wanted your ass safe. I had one choice. I had to find someone I could trust with your life, someone who was crazy enough to kill everyone in his path if he had to do it and someone who had more family loyalty than most."

"Oh well gee, Tanner, then I guess there wasn't a second thought about who was perfect for the job then. A man who can kill his father would certainly be my first choice!"

"He's not going to marry you, Ally."

"I don't want to marry his sorry ass either right now!"

"You don't want to marry either one of us. You want us both. I told you I made a decision to let you two stay together when I saw you at the airport. That's not entirely true. Ally, when I realized your head was wanted by the Colombian cartel, I couldn't risk turning your security over to someone who might double-cross you in the middle of the job. I had to hand you over to someone who would care for you in every way, if needed. Santino was the right man for various reasons."

"Mainly because you thought he'd find me attractive."

"We've shared women before. I knew he'd find you desirable. I even knew he'd fall in love with you. I only hoped he wouldn't have to keep you on the run for as long as he did, obviously my luck ran a little short. Imagine, a bookie with bad luck."

"I don't want to listen to this." She was still processing. "Do you realize how sick this is?" She stomped over to the bed. "This is really, really sick. He is your brother!"

"Half-brother." Tanner corrected her. "And you weren't supposed to get pregnant."

"Yeah, talk about inconvenient. If I hadn't gotten myself pregnant, Santino would've just walked away at the end of the job and never looked back."

"He would've. He's walked away from plenty of jobs, family, and lots of women. Yeah, he would've walked away from you, too. It's who he is, Ally. While you may see him one way, never forget who lies beneath the skin. He is a killer. It's in him to kill, a basic need for some, a thrill for others, but for Santino, it's his livelihood and his adrenaline rush so it's both—a need and a thrill."

"He's right."

Ally spun around and glared at the man who possessed the darkest of voices.

"Santino," she whispered. And her heart crumbled right there.

\* \* \* \*

White cotton pants clung to Santino's tanned skin. The soft curls right above the tie at his waist made Ally's mouth water. "What are you doing up?"

"It's tough enough to sleep through the fucking but the screaming and yelling made it impossible."

Ally felt her skin heat. The man had the ability to make her hot in all the wrong places, or right ones, if she was in the mood. Right now, she wasn't.

He walked over and casually pulled her into a chair with him. He sat down and pulled her right against the hard ridge of his cock. "All those moans and groans made for a horny man, ya know?" His arms wrapped around her waist.

With her elbow, she poked him in the side. "The last thing I want—or need—is another cock in my...my...vagina!"

"Don't you mean, your *pussy*?" he asked, nipping at her ear and grinding his dick against her bottom. "Darlin' that's precisely where mine is going."

Tanner sneered. "Leave her alone. She's having an Ally-tantrum. They generally pass after she throws a few things and curses everyone her. It makes her feel better, you know, more like a woman in control."

"Shut up, Tanner."

"You know, I'd love to have ten dollars for every time you've told me to 'shut up' in the last ten years."

She wrinkled her nose. "Well then try this one. How about go fuck yourself?"

"Hell, I'd probably be rich on that one." He took two steps forward. "After all, I've done that a lot here lately without you around. Which hand pays more, my left one or my right one?"

"You just had to tell her everything, huh?" Santino asked Tanner, pointing an accusing finger.

"Well, considering the fact she came to me two hours late in the first place, you're lucky I chose to tell her when I did. If I'd been a smarter man, I would've cleared my conscience when she was on top of you, begging for more."

Santino's fingers crawled under Ally's top and he cupped her breast. "Ally, it was better for all of us if we didn't discuss it much."

"Discuss it much," she muttered.

He tweaked her nipple and she smacked his hand away. "Stop it, Santino. I'm not in the mood."

Santino snarled. "Ain't that a damn shame, baby? You got less than five to get in the mood or I'll strap you to that bed and make you fucking scream."

"Shut up, Santino."

He arched a brow and frowned. She'd never told him to shut up that she recalled and he looked totally pissed that he'd heard it then. She tried to wiggle away from him but he held fast to her hips, using them for leverage to press his dick against her butt.

"I don't know why you're so pissed," Santino said. "It's not something that came up."

"We didn't talk about it because I didn't know you were his brother! Damn you both!"

"Damn me again, Ally. It will make you feel better and, sweetheart, if you feel any better here, you can figure on getting fucked," Santino warned her. "Three minutes. Tops." His hands dropped to his pants and she felt him loosen the tie at his waist and then yank his pants down.

She jumped up fast enough to escape from the average man, but considering the ten-inches of pulsating flesh at her seam, she realized an average man didn't have her seated on his lap. Teasing her, he followed her. "Here, baby, see Exhibit A of why I couldn't get any sleep. Feel it twitch?"

"Fuck me with it and you'll lose it," she said before she turned an evil eye back to Tanner. "And you...just so you know, I wouldn't have ever fallen for him, if I hadn't first...Oh God!" Santino bent her

over and penetrated her in less than a second. Ally's head dropped a little as the force of Santino's dick wedged into her pussy. He bypassed her ass and aimed for her pussy and she cried out when he thrust inside her again.

Santino's hot mouth covered her ear. "Damn straight I'm going to lose it. Right inside that tight little snatch. And you're going to feel every stroke, ripple, and every last drop." He grabbed her hips and filled her with his size. She felt like a limp dish rag as she moved with him.

"That's hot." Tanner looked like he meant it. The clue was of course, in the pants—the ones he had shed in less than two seconds.

Tanner fisted his cock and brushed the tip across her lips. She moaned out with a split mix of pleasure and pain. Shoving himself past her parched lips, he was greedy and made an effort to apologize but she latched around him with a pulling, sucking fashion that left him standing on his tip-toes one minute and rolling to the balls of his feet the next.

"Come on baby, ride this out with me, darlin'," Santino groaned. He slapped her ass and she bucked against him as he came. His sperm filled her, spilling down the insides of her thighs and he grabbed her hair and hissed, "This is what you'd miss, Ally. You'd miss me. You'd miss Tanner. You'd miss the eroticism of having two men love you."

Santino spanked her again and then caressed her bottom, smoothing over the cheeks wherever he paddled her tail last. His rhythmic smacks only encouraged that runaway orgasm, the kind he knew a playful strike would bring.

He didn't have to think about the best way to fuck her because he knew precisely how to give her what she needed whether it was a word, a look, or the way he took her, it didn't really matter. She could come on contact with Santino and she empowered him to believe he practically owned her. In truth? He probably did. And so did Tanner.

Santino toyed with her, delving inside her walls with a slow screw. Ally moaned, mumbled and brought on the kind of deep throat massage Tanner loved most. And she sucked in both men—one with her moist mouth, one with her pulsing channel, realizing then they were both good to go until the very last drop.

## Chapter Nineteen

"That's good news. I'm glad to hear it. Yeah, I'll tell him. He's here somewhere. Yeah, sure. No problem. Thanks." Darren hung up the phone and wheeled around to face his sister. "Good morning."

"Good morning to you, too. Business?" She pointed to the phone.

"Yeah, it's nothing." He smirked. "Speaking of nothing..." He gave a quick glance to the men joining them. "I heard you squealing like a monkey last night. You two or three, or how ever many of you are in one bed at one time, are going to have to hold it down. We have kids in the house."

David mumbled as he walked in behind Tanner and Santino. "By the sounds of it last night, we're going to have several more running around here before long. Can we not do something to keep the noise to a minimum?"

"Morning to you too, David." Ally popped him a kiss on his cheek.

"Hey now. I don't want to think about where those lips of yours spent the night."

Ally smiled and then plopped down on the sofa with a hot cup of coffee. "So, men. What's on the agenda for the day?" She casually sipped her hot brew studying her brothers and her lovers. She fully expected to find herself on the inside of the family business.

David and Darren exchanged looks with one another and then shot Tanner one of those 'you-handle-her' stares and she recognized it. She'd seen a lot of those, ever since her teens.

"Ally, you're going to have to give us a few minutes," Tanner said.

Santino watched her curiously. She caught his gaze and then looked away. He knew she wasn't a

weak woman. He'd watched her kill. She handled herself with the expertise of a fighter and she didn't slink away.

"I'm not leaving."

"I'll join you by the pool in a few minutes, okay, baby?" Tanner asked, trying to pacify her.

With a saucy grin, she hopped to her feet. Santino's eyes widened. He probably saw what was next. Maybe they'd spent so much time with one another that the element of surprise was long gone.

She walked over to Tanner and shoved her coffee mug into his hands. "I tell you what, sugar. I'll be outside by the pool. You know, lying there topless, for all to see. Where is the best place to gain a little exposure? I see there's the occasional boat on the south side of the property, maybe that's where I'll sunbathe instead."

She narrowed her gaze and studied his. Sure enough, he got the message.

Walking away, she called out over her shoulder. "Oh, and that hard-on there in your pants, see if you can't take care of it yourself, okay, *baby?*"

Tanner groaned. "Thanks, Ally. I'll do just that."

"Not a problem, lover."

The men were laughing. Darren slapped Tanner on the back and David poured himself a glass of juice.

Ally should've counted on this sort of thing. Women had their place with men like Tanner Dorsey and Santino DeLuca—on their backs. She narrowed her gaze, grabbed the brass doorknobs on each terrace door and pushed them open with both hands. Right before she walked out, she looked back over her right shoulder.

At that moment, not one second before, she saw a glimmer of fear flicker in Santino's eyes. As if it happened in slow motion, she blinked, looked at Tanner, who seemed stuck in between the laugh he was having with her brothers and the sudden danger looming in front of him.

And everything from there spiraled out of control.

"Ally!" Tanner screamed. A ricochet of bullets sprayed across the front lawn. Men were crawling over the grounds, the kids were in the pool, baby Rios in the nursery and Lord only knew where her mother was at the time. Ally didn't have time to think, only react.

When she'd unpacked, she'd stashed her weapons throughout the house because she realized her brothers and Tanner would take them from her. She happened to stash them two feet from where she stood. A bullet barely scraped her shoulder and she dropped, rolled, tugged hand grenades and guns from her bag while slinging the duffle toward Santino.

"Momma!" Molly screamed and Holly flopped down on the pool steps. Tears poured so fast from their eyes that it looked like they were the source for the water supply.

"Stay down!" Ally sprinted toward the pool as Santino walked onto the terrace, tossing a few grenades and blowing up everything. "Ally! Stay back, damn it!" Santino shouted as he backed toward her, trying to cover her. "There are too many of them, damn it—go back! Let me do this!"

Ally ran. She scooped up her daughters and shielded them with her body, catching another bullet in her right arm. "Damn it!"

Darren and David rushed onto the terrace with a spray of bullets flying from machine guns. Tanner apparently ran for the baby and Ally's mother. She couldn't see him, couldn't find him.

Running, she took another bullet in her ass. "Damn it to fucking hell!" She screamed out in agony as she had to fight now to stay on her feet, the pain, the blood gushing from her body, all of it was too much.

Santino wouldn't get out of her way. He continued to step in front of her in an effort to guard her with his life. "Fucking move, Ally!" he screamed.

"Momma's bleeding!" one of the girls yelled.

"Ally, are you hit?" Santino screamed over his shoulder, still covering them, shooting rounds, firing toward their attackers. "Damn it, Ally? Are you hurt?"

Men continued to march toward them and Santino fought hard, protecting them—his woman and his brother's girls. "Somebody get Rios!" he screamed.

"Tanner's going for him," David snapped, waving a machine gun in front of his lower body.

"Shit!" Ally screamed, realizing how she was bleeding. There on the porch stood her family, fighting to protect their home and she was bleeding out, staining the damn tile.

"Ally!" Terror rang. Hell came down all around them.

Ally spotted Tanner rushing Mrs. Thacker, her mom, and the baby carrier into a secret passage. He motioned for the girls, for Ally. She couldn't leave Santino now and there were nearly a hundred men on their front lawn.

"Hurry girls," she said, standing in front of them. They had to make it the rest of the way on their own. "Run to Daddy, run, and don't look back, Mommy loves you. Now go!" She watched as the girls ran into their daddy's arms and she locked eyes with Tanner. "Don't." She mouthed the words and then turned away from him, tossing aside a handgun and picking up an automatic weapon.

"Ally! Get out of there!" She heard Tanner scream for her, begging almost, but she wasn't going to leave her brothers to fight these men. She wasn't going to abandon Santino and leave him to die for her, for them. No one ever had his back. No one ever cared enough to save him—until now.

"Go back!" She kept hearing them warn her as the ricocheting bullets from hell's war threatened their lives. Shattered glass rippled as the shots were fired into the house. The pool danced with bubbles forming on the water as the pellets skipped across the crystal blue surface and everything continued to look like a battle that couldn't be won.

Ally saw a bullet graze David's shoulder. He flinched, but kept marching forward, determined to reach the intruders with their guns. "Ally, damn it, leave with Tanner!"

"Not on your life!" she screamed, pulling the trigger again. She reloaded, ducked, rolled, bled the fuck everywhere, but by God, she fought with her family.

Santino guarded her as much as possible but the unexpected ambush left them at a disadvantage. They were surrounded. There was no escape without endangering the others. Ally crawled across the ceramic tile floor, grabbed two more clips, two loaded Glocks, and another grenade.

A cluster of men were reloading behind the gazebo and Ally stepped forward, rushed past her brothers, hurried by Santino, and tossed the grenade. "That's for taking a shot at my ass!"

The loud explosion rocked the earth and the bodies affected by the grenade tumbled across the air. It was the last thing she remembered.

## Epilogue—Unspoken Requests

"She should be fine in a few days," a voice of authority told someone waiting nearby. Still, she couldn't shake sleep, or the pain. "She must be quite a fighter," the same voice pointed out. "The average man couldn't have sustained those injuries. She's something else."

"She sure is," Santino said, too much pride revealed in his strong voice.

"Is there any reason why she took five shots to her body and the rest of you didn't have a scratch?"

Tanner grunted. She'd know that grunt anywhere.

"Well?" Someone seemed irritated that he had to ask such a question. Probably a doctor they'd kidnapped from some high society function, blind-folded, and brought to take care of the wounded. Boy, her world was quite different on this side of the law.

She liked the previous side she represented. At least as an agent, she didn't have to get treated on the sly. If she happened to find herself wounded, hospitals were available and they would be happy to help. Now, that wasn't an option, apparently.

Yeah, she liked working on the right side of the law. She felt Tanner's lips on hers. "I love you, Ally." Then, Santino's hot breath against her hand. Well, maybe not. This side had a lot more personal benefits.

"Her brother was pretty banged up too," Tanner finally replied. "Maybe you should check him out."

"David wouldn't let anyone take care of him. He dug the bullets out and stitched himself right up," her mother said, obviously proud of the fact.

She opened one eye, and looked around the room. "Where are we?"

"Home," Tanner replied.

Her head rolled from one side of the pillow to the other and she tried to focus on the view outside.

"We're not in Bermuda."

Santino squeezed her hand. "We've decided to try out a different pace."

"Did everyone make it out?"

"Everyone's fine dear," her mother reassured her.

Ally closed her eyes again and let out a long sigh. "Someone shot me in the ass again."

"Yep. That ass is always a great target." Tanner made the remark and Ally gritted her teeth.

"It's not funny," she complained. "It hurts like hell."

"Well, at least the doctor says it will be back in good working order in no time at all."

"He did not," Ally said.

"How would you know? You've been out for several days." Tanner continued to tease.

Ally tried to focus on the view from her window again. "Where are we?" she whined.

Santino stroked her cheek and then kissed her on the brow. "You're safe and you're home, Ally."

"But where is home?" she asked weakly, Santino placed little Rios in his mother's arms. Her girls climbed up on the bed and Tanner sat down next to them.

Holly laid her head over on her mother's stomach and Molly kept tickling her fingers. "Momma, home is wherever you are," Molly said.

"Yes, you're right," Ally said, almost drifting off to sleep. "And I've finally made it home."

*Destiny Blaine*

## About the Author

*An international best selling, award-winning e-book and trade paperback author, Destiny Blaine writes in various genres. Married for over twenty years, Destiny and her husband live in East Tennessee with their two teenagers. You're invited to visit Destiny's website at: [www.destinyblaine.com](http://www.destinyblaine.com)*

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