

A Wicked Ride

A photograph of a muscular man and a woman in a forest. The man is shirtless, showing his abdominal muscles, and is looking upwards with his hand behind his head. The woman is wearing a colorful, patterned dress and is also looking upwards. They are standing in front of a dense green forest.

Avril Ashton

The Wicked: Book 1

Sasha Forde has retired from life as master thief, but a visit from a mobster sends her right back in. In order to save her family—and herself—from jail, she must steal evidence hidden in a lawyer's office. She sets out to do what she considers a simple B and E, but someone else has arrived first. And he holds her life in his tattooed hands. Not for long.

Niko Davaris is all about revenge on the man who tried to kill him. The evidence he stole is the first step in that direction. He's not thrilled to wake up with a gun to his head. The woman on the other end is cocky, smug and too damn hot for her own good. He wants her, she wants the evidence. When she takes it and disappears, he gives chase. Battle lines are blurred as they give in to temptation, but on a ride like this, someone has to come out on top. Who will it be?

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A WICKED RIDE
THE WICKED SERIES ONE

BY

AVRIL ASHTON

DEDICATION

This is for my mother who taught me to love the written word. The Mister and my daughter for the understanding and support. I love you, always. To my brothers and sisters back in the Spice Isle, yes, I'm a nerd. Love you.

I have the most amazing and talented critique partners: Cassandra Corcoran, D'Ann Linscott-Dunham, Christine Warner and Danica Avet. You guys rock and you're all next. Let's go get 'em.

On this eventful journey I've made many friends. Everyone's been so great, embracing and welcoming. To all the authors at WickedlySexyRomance – way too many to mention here – thanks for the laughs and the support, it's been invaluable. Thanks to my sister from another Texas mister, Robin Badillo, who answered all my panicked emails even when she was still a newbie herself.

Waving at Drea and BR.

CHAPTER 1

Dust and cobwebs tickled her nose.

In the cramped stillness of an overhead air duct, Sasha Forde stifled a sneeze. She gritted her teeth, but kept her watery eyes trained on the activity in the lawyer's office below her. Through the grate, she had a fairly unobstructed view of the three men dressed like her – all black, ski masks and gloves.

A rat, the size of a small cat, scurried past. Sasha bit back a scream. Someone would pay dearly for this. She'd been handpicked to break in and steal the evidence in the room below, but it seemed the men didn't get the memo this job belonged to her.

She inched forward on her elbows, Baby Glock in hand, and rested her forehead against the grate. A bead of sweat escaped her cap and slid down her left temple.

"Go through every scrap of paper," one of the men instructed. His deep voice appeared to rumble in the otherwise quiet room.

Is he the man in charge?

The two men fanned out to the row of file cabinets against the eggshell-colored wall.

She studied the one who spoke. He stood like a linebacker, ready to move at a moment's notice. Wide shoulders and lean, hard muscle dominated his frame. He wore a plain black sweatshirt with the hood covering his head. Black jeans were tucked into black combat boots laced

halfway up. From her vantage point, his eyes were two black holes through the tiny slits in his mask.

As if he'd heard her silent appraisal, he turned. His sure footsteps brought him to the large oak desk located below her position. She held her breath while her heart raced.

He pulled out the high backed chair and the wheels slid smoothly across the plush dark carpet. The linebacker flipped off the hood of his sweatshirt, folded his giant frame into the chair and switched on the computer.

The tap-tap of his gloved fingers on the keyboard punctuated the silence. Over in the corner of the spacious office, his men went about their search. Sounds of cabinets opening and closing and papers shuffling grated on her nerve endings.

She bit the inside of her cheek to stave off a groan. *This is going to be a long ass night.*

"Niko, it's not here."

"Here either."

Hushed words brought her out of her pity party as the two men rifling through the cabinets reported their non-findings to the man at the computer.

Niko, huh? She filed the name away.

"Then it has to be here. She made two copies and we already have the one from her house."

She being attorney Harper Royce, the one whose office they currently occupied.

Niko paused and fanned himself with a yellow envelope lying on the desk. Turning back to the computer, his fingers beat double time on the keyboard. His men walked over to him and stood like sentries while he worked.

Damn, they'd already been to Harper Royce's house. Sasha planned to do the house job last since it posed minimal challenges compared to this one, but now she'd have to scratch it off her list.

How did these men know about Harper Royce's investigation into Johan Vicente? From what she gathered from skulking around, the only other person Harper told about her extra-curricular activities was the informant feeding her Vicente's business. Someone other than the man who'd sent Sasha didn't want the authorities to get the incriminating evidence.

Sasha wiggled her left foot. Her clothes were damp with sweat. She needed a drink. Hell, she needed two. And she also needed a bath. No doubt the rodents and bugs in this particular part of hell had pissed and laid eggs all over her.

Oh, heads were going to roll over this. One of which was sure to be the linebacker's below her. Her foster parents' lives were at stake, which was why she chose to do this herself.

Everything had been going according to plan—Harper left her office at nine-thirty. The building shut down at ten. And at eleven, Sasha had been set to slide out of the duct, then drop onto the desk below. The whisper of the door halted her plans.

She glared at her pink Timex. 11:46.

"Found it."

The triumphant words were barely spoken above a murmur, yet they resonated through her like a punch to the stomach.

Niko inserted a tiny blue flash drive into the USB slot on the computer. She watched in horror as the information she'd come for downloaded onto the drive. A stranger held it. He couldn't know he'd just sentenced her foster parents to death and her to an orange prison jumpsuit. The useless color fucked horribly with her skin tone.

Niko tore off his mask and stood. "Good thing there aren't any cameras in here. I'm burning the fuck up." His men murmured in agreement. He walked around the desk

and stood facing her position as he held up the flash drive. She got the first glimpse of his face and her pulse stuttered. Sasha understood the implications of him having the information on the flash drive, yet her eyes devoured his brutal beauty.

Sweat dripped from his face onto the carpet. The overhead light glinted off his shaved head, the color of smooth copper. His high cheek bones and square jaw belonged on a New York runway, and the bump on his nose bridge indicated it'd been broken at least once. A neatly trimmed goatee framed the most suckable lips *ever*.

And tattoos. They poked from underneath his shirt like dark talons, wrapped around his neck from the left, then dipped back under his shirt. Even more spread up his nape, unto his skull and curled around his left ear.

She had the urge to see what the rest of his body looked like.

"Where'd you find it?" one of his men asked.

Niko wiped his brow with his sleeve. "Buried in a list for Christmas decorations. Two years old."

His men chuckled. A smile shadowed Niko's lips.

She wished she could see his eyes, but he stood too far away for her to tell.

"Alright." Niko hustled his men. "Maysin, take care of the flash drive so we can get the hell up outta here. J, with me." He motioned to the third man.

The one called Maysin sat in the chair Niko vacated. His dark ponytail escaped from the back of his mask and hung to the middle of his back. He pulled out a drill no bigger than the palm of his hand and proceeded to dismantle the computer. Niko and J stood guard on either side of the door.

Maysin drilled holes into the hard drive he'd removed from the computer's innards. The handy little tool barely made a purr as he decimated the best evidence anyone ever

had against Johan Vicente, gun runner, drug kingpin and all around nasty motherfucker. More importantly known as the man promising to end the lives of Sasha's foster parents, if she didn't produce the information on the computer.

Done drilling, Maysin rummaged in the pockets of his dark jeans, only to reemerge with what looked like a couple of magnets the size of Sasha's BlackBerry. He used the magnets to scrape against the hard drive, again and again, making it so nothing on the drive would ever be recovered.

Nice really. Except now she'd have to hurt him and J. Niko? Well, since he appeared to be the mastermind of this little OP, she had other plans for him.

When he'd accomplished what he set out to do, Maysin left the magnets on the hard drive and they left the way they came. Through the door, single file.

Niko brought up the rear and at the door he turned. His dark gaze swept the room one last time. With a curve to his lips, he pulled his ski mask back on and turned around. The door closed behind him. He disappeared.

She felt his absence like a physical ache, until she remembered he had something she needed. She'd get the drive soon.

As head of the notorious Shadow Gang, she led her team in retrieving the most sought after and hard to find items. Retrieving had a more sophisticated ring to it, unlike the more common term. Stealing. She'd disbanded the group a few months ago, choosing to go legit and partner with her brother in the nightclub business. Her identity and that of the other members were safe, or so she'd thought, until she had a face to face with Vicente.

He laid it all out for her as if she still wore knee highs on the playground. She'd break into Harper Royce's office and make sure the evidence the lawyer had against him disappeared. Sasha didn't question why a hotshot lawyer,

and not the state, had the evidence. If she refused to do Vicente's bidding, the world would know the identity of the members of The Shadow Gang, and her foster parents would be killed.

Hell of a choice. She could go to prison, but she wouldn't sentence the others to the same fate. Not if she could prevent it. And there was no way in hell she'd allow him to hurt one hair on her foster parents'—the Hughes—heads. So she'd booked the Hughes on a two week cruise to the Caribbean, mumbled something about an early anniversary present and waved them off yesterday. In the end, she agreed to Vicente's terms. He knew she would. She'd procure the evidence, be the good little thief she once was.

Times like these were when she missed Terry the most. Terry Garraway founded the Shadow Gang and recruited her when she was eighteen. He became her lover and best friend. Sasha could've used some of his cool logic right now. Unfortunately, he died three years ago. Gunned down in the streets for his wallet. She swallowed the bitter taste thinking of him always left in her mouth. Her failings, not his.

Now here she was, all alone since she chose not to tell the others about her deal with the devil. She'd been thwarted by a linebacker with a pretty face and bitable lips.

Sasha grinned in the darkness, present discomforts forgotten. A few more minutes and she'd finally be rid of this place. She had a flash drive to recover, a couple skulls to crack and a brand new toy to play with.

The homeless Wino she'd paid a Benji to watch her car in the alley behind the building reported three men dressed in black hopping into a like-colored SUV. He squinted up at her from his bed of cardboard while she questioned him on the direction the SUV headed. A bony finger pointed down Broad Street, toward the Central Waterfront. She gave him

an extra five and got into her car, smiling.

If prompted, Mr. Wino would never be able to identify Sasha. He saw and spoke to a woman with short spiked black hair, a ring in her nose and a long ugly slash across her right cheekbone. She also had a thick and distinct southern accent.

None of those characteristics matched Sasha at all. She tipped her invisible hat to Paula Deen for the cooking lessons and the borrowed accent.

She stepped on the gas.

Central Waterfront in Seattle's downtown area, once the oasis of maritime activities, was being converted over for urban and recreational uses. The piers, centuries old, were now housing restaurants and storefronts. There was an aquarium, several parks and one hotel. Over the water, no less.

She drove straight down Broad and turned left on Alaskan way. The Edgewater Hotel sat on pier 67 and since she didn't want to announce her arrival, she parked two piers over. She'd take the chance to check out the vehicles, see if any matched Mr. Wino's description.

She sat in the car and peeled off the fake wound on her face and unclipped the ring in her nose. "Ouch!" That motherfucker pinched. She shoved the pieces of her disguise into the glove compartment of the rusted ten year old Ford Fiesta she used for jobs and slammed it shut.

She checked her image in the rearview as she pulled off the wig and tossed it onto the backseat. Her fingers combed through her hair. She winked and blew herself a kiss. Unlike the Wino, Niko would meet the real Sasha Forde.

Poor, unsuspecting fool.

Her linebacker didn't know it yet, but Sasha had him in her sights and she always caught her prey.

CHAPTER 2

Niko Davaris bolted upright in the heavy darkness of his hotel room. His naked body dripped with sweat and his chest heaved as he gulped air into his lungs. Remnants of his all-too-familiar dream stayed with him. Visions of blue-tipped flames danced in front of his wide eyes. The smell of gasoline still stung his nostrils after all this time, and the sound of car metal crashing over jagged rocks echoed in his head.

A nightmare I can't seem to get away from. His throat felt parched. He flung off the sheets draped around his waist and dug his fingers into the firm mattress in an attempt to stop his body's tremors.

Click.

The unmistakable sound of a gun cock.

Fuck! Niko froze with his right leg hanging off the side of the bed. *How did Vicente find me?*

The sound came from the foot of the bed, but the room remained pitch black—he couldn't see a thing. Stiff fingers crept under the pillow for the SIG P90 he kept there.

"Tsk, tsk. Bad boy." The throaty female voice halted his movements. It skitted over his skin and left goose bumps in its wake.

What the hell?

The overhead light flicked on. He blinked at the brightness, then took in his uninvited guest sprawled in the

black leather armchair at the foot of the bed. She looked at him through lowered eyelids, head tilted back. The left side of her head was shaved close to the scalp, but the right side appeared untouched. Bangs, kissed with light pink, obscured her right eye. Dark waves brushed a shoulder the shade of creamy sepia. A nickel plated Glock pointed at his head.

“Who the fuck are you?” He couldn’t believe this person got the drop on him.

Her bow lips curved into a smile and she dragged her gaze down his body.

A muscle began a slow tick in his jaw.

“Nice view.” She licked her lips.

His cock pulsed. Niko fought the urge to cover the wayward organ. She had the gun, so no sudden movements. “Who are you?” he demanded again. Fuck, he hated repeating himself.

She stood, gun still trained on him. She was barely five-foot-five and built. Make that stacked.

Huge breasts spilled out of a pink bustier. An image of his face buried between them flashed in his mind and made his groin tighten. Her smooth stomach was exposed and the tiniest waist, about the span of his hands, flared out to wide hips. Black leggings were tucked into black knee boots complete with silver buckles and almost four inch heels.

Her gaze zeroed in on his cock. “You have something I need, Niko.”

Fuck if he didn’t get harder at her statement. Then it registered, she knew his name. It could mean only one thing—after hiding for three years, his past had finally caught up with him.

Niko cleared his throat. He needed to distract her to get his gun. Regret churned in his gut at the prospect of hurting a woman, but he couldn’t think about that. It was clearly

him or her.

"It seems you have me at a disadvantage," he growled.

"I know, right? Hardly seems fair." Her husky laugh sent sweat trickling down his spine.

What was it about this woman that made his long-neglected body react? He studied her heart-shaped face with its pert nose and full lips. Enjoyment sparkled in the depths of her almond eyes.

"Who sent you?" Niko's voice hardened as he grew tired of all the questions and no answers.

His visitor raised a perfectly arched brow. "Oh, honey. Do I look like I take orders?"

"What do you want then?"

All trace of softness vanished from her face. Her eyes became glacial. If Niko didn't know before, now he did. This wasn't someone to be messed with. Unfortunately for her, neither was he.

"The flash drive."

Not the answer he expected. He shook his head. "Sorry, no clue what you're talking about." That flash drive was his leverage against the man who tried to kill him, but put him in a coma instead. Niko waited three years for his shot at Vicente, there was no way he'd let the woman in front of him take it away.

The stranger nodded once as if she'd come to some kind of decision and walked backward to the chair with the burner still trained on him. "Shall I tell you a story, Niko?"

She continued on without waiting for his reply. "I believe I shall." She sat. "So there I am, crawling through the godforsaken air ducts of Harper Royce's office, when three men enter the room dressed in black."

Mother. Fuck. She knew.

"Shall I go on, Niko?" She pursed her lips and waited for his reply.

Mute, he shook his head.

"I thought not. Now, why don't we start over? And you can forget about the SIG, it's mine now." Gaze and gun on him, she reached down with her free hand. Sure enough, when she held her hand up, there was the SIG.

Damn, she's good.

She put his gun back on the floor next to her feet and sprawled back in the chair. "You got a girlfriend?"

Okay, what? "What does that have to do with anything?"

She leaned forward, her gaze flashing to his face and the gun hand steady. "Don't for one second think I won't shoot you between those pretty eyes. Answer the fucking question."

Obviously, she was nuts. Niko humored her while he thought of a way to get his gun back. "No, I don't have a girlfriend."

The gold doorknockers in her ears swung when she shook her head. "Now that's a shame. That body of yours was meant to be ridden hard. And often."

She was killing him with nothing but her voice and her words. Niko swallowed, throat dry. He tore his gaze away from her eyes and shot a quick glance down her body. Bad idea. All the blood in his body pooled in his cock. He shifted slightly to ease the ache.

"I've been watching you sleep."

Niko blinked to hide his shocked expression. She surprised him at every turn. Three years he hid from Vicente without his former employer knowing he was alive or so close, yet here he sat. He never figured a doll-like woman would be the one to find him.

"You really should get a sturdier lock for your door. You're damned lucky it's you I found and not—ah, what were their names again? Maysin and J." She stood, strutted over to him. "It's been a pleasure to meet you, Niko

Davaris." She leaned over and put her lips to his right ear.

Sparks raced up and down his spine, but Niko ignored them. He grabbed her by the throat. Her gun clattered to the floor as he yanked her down until they were face to face. "Now, why would you leave yourself open like this?"

Her eyes were wide, the pupils dilated. "Maybe it's all a part of my plan. Maybe I wanted your hands on me."

"You're a cocky little thing, aren't you? What's your name?"

"Now why would I make it so easy for you?" Her lips curved up.

"This isn't a game." His fingers squeezed the smooth flesh of her neck. "You've no idea the shit you're fucking with."

Her body stayed relaxed, her breathing didn't falter once. "So you've got me." Mint-scented breath caressed his face. "I wonder what you're going to do next?" She moved slowly until one of her legs draped over his on the bed.

Niko's pulsing cock sat up straighter at the brush of her leg. He cursed his traitorous body—he should've taken his friends' advice and gotten laid. If he had, he wouldn't be contemplating what it'd be like to make this woman orgasm.

He glared down at his naked crotch and back at her, but her attention centered on his mouth. "Don't fuck with things you know nothing about, Pink Lady."

"Why don't you bring me up to speed, hmm?" She met his eyes. "I'm all ears, Niko."

She wasn't afraid. The fingers around her neck flexed. He'd vowed to never hurt another person when he awoke from the coma, but he needed the drive to lure John Vicente to him. The smoldering woman in his grasp couldn't have it. Vicente had a debt to repay and Niko wouldn't allow anyone to fuck up his plans. Three years he'd waited and within the next few days, shit would hit the proverbial fan. The flash drive was the centerpiece.

"Hey," she murmured. Something sharp and cool pricked his side. "Don't take our current position as a statement that I don't like your hands on me, 'cause I do."

His gaze traveled down his torso, stopped at the straight razor she held to his side. *Christ. Who is she?*

"Since I last saw you I've been trying to picture you naked," she said in that husky voice. "Nothing comes close to the real thing."

He gritted his teeth. Desire warred with his long-suffering need for revenge. Nothing could come before him getting back at the man who'd taken his child and left Niko to die.

"Cat got your tongue?" she asked. "Pity. I suggest you let me go before I carve my initials into your beautiful skin."

Niko swallowed a humorless chuckle. He'd survived worst things—cuts from a straight razor didn't faze him. The woman staring at him with desire in her eyes did. Her heated nearness scalded him. His hold on her neck loosened. He couldn't let her have the drive, but she could walk out of there before he did the things his three-years-celibate body demanded he do.

"Leave," he growled. "Now." His hand fell away from her neck. He curled it against the urge to touch her again.

"Aww, so soon?" The razor disappeared. She scrambled off him with a pout. "When we meet again—and we will meet again, Niko—your ass is mine." Gaze on him, she grabbed her gun and backed toward the door.

He couldn't breathe, she'd taken all his air. His limbs felt heavy and uncooperative.

She groped behind her for the door, pulled it open. "By the way, thanks for the flash drive." The razor fell to the floor as she threw up two fingers. "Deuces." Then she disappeared.

Niko jumped off the bed. He raced to the spot he'd hidden the drive, inside the fake wall in his closet.

Empty.

Anger and anticipation filled him.

She held a gun to his head, stole from him.

He dragged air into his lungs and picked up his cell phone from the night table. He hit speed dial one and waited for it to ring.

"Get over here now, and bring your equipment."

"Found her!"

Niko got up from the bed and walked over to where his friend Maysin Winthrop-Ferreira sat in the leather chair, tapping away on his laptop.

"Where is she?" He'd given Maysin his mysterious visitor's description and told him to find her. An ace with computers, Maysin had hacked into The Edgewater's security cameras as well as those from nearby businesses. It'd been over an hour, but if anyone could do it, it would be him.

"She parked near Pier 69." Maysin's fingers flew over the keys. "Damn, she's good." Admiration colored his words.

"What?" Niko crouched at his side to look at the computer screen.

"Well, look at this." Maysin pulled up the different frames of the woman on the screen. "She never shows her face, it's like she knows where the cameras are. Everything I have is of her profile."

"Damn it." Niko wiped a hand across his face. She wasn't getting away. He had to have...the drive.

"What's so important about this woman?" Maysin looked up at him.

"She has something I want." Niko spun away and stalked to the bed. His wants warred with his needs until he couldn't tell which was which. The only thing he knew was he needed to find her. Maysin and Justice didn't need to

know what transpired. He'd get back the drive and the plan would go on as scheduled.

Yes, he'd find the cocky woman with the fuck-me body and finally bring an end to his living nightmare, Johan Vicente. Nothing else mattered.

He sat on the edge of the bed under Maysin's scrutiny. The long slash on his friend's left cheek stood a stark white against his dark skin.

"I have to find out who she is," Niko said simply.

Maysin raised an eyebrow, but kept quiet. He flipped his unbound hair over his shoulder and turned his attention back to the computer screen.

Niko stretched out on the bed, only to jump back up when Maysin said, "I think I found something."

"What is it?" He bent over Maysin's shoulder.

"See here?" Maysin tapped at the picture on the screen. His mystery woman stood next to a car with her back to them, her hand on the car door.

"I don't get it."

"Look closer," Maysin urged.

Niko frowned at the grainy photo on the computer screen. "Her reflection." He grabbed Maysin's shoulder. "Her face is reflected in the car window." A wide grin spread over his face.

"Exactly and I can lift it off like so." Maysin tapped some keys and the face mirrored in the car window enlarged.

Then cleared.

"Wow." Maysin stared at her face.

"That's her." Niko almost shouted the words. She stared at him with one eyebrow arched and a curve to her lips. "Find her name and address."

"On it. I'm running the plates on the car," Maysin said. Two seconds later, the computer beeped. "The plates are stolen."

Figures. Niko bit back a curse. "What about her face? Go through all agencies, try different states."

If Maysin didn't like Niko's tone of voice, he didn't show it. Instead his fingers did their magic on the keyboard. A few minutes later, as Niko paced, a ping sounded.

"Got her!"

Niko rushed to his side.

"She's in California's DMV records with a 2010 Jaguar, name —"

"Sasha Forde." Niko whispered the name on the screen in reverence.

"Yes. Checking that name in Seattle and we have...one Sasha Forde at 737 Olive Way, downtown."

"She's minutes away." Niko committed the address on screen to memory as his cock stirred. His pulsed leaped at the thought of seeing her again, bantering with her. The remembered huskiness of her voice made his body overheat.

"Niko?"

He turned to his friend. "Thanks, Mace."

"Sure, even if you refuse to tell me who she is. She's hot."

"She's mine." Niko stared into the cocky gaze on the computer. She'd been right.

They would see each other again.

CHAPTER 3

Three guesses on the identity of the culprit riding her bumper.

Sasha gripped the steering wheel of her silver 2010 Jaguar XK Coupe with both hands covered in fingerless gloves. She pressed down on the gas with a foot encased in black, thigh high Louboutins. The headlights of the pursuing SUV drew closer in her rearview.

She grinned. Well, damn. Finally.

It'd been two days—a girl could only wait for so long. She'd thought he wouldn't come looking for her. But here he was. He wanted the flash drive and she wanted his body.

One ride on the train would purge him from her thoughts. Just her luck he'd come when she was on her way to remove the drive from its hiding place. She had a few days left on Vicente's deadline, but she wanted to get the whole thing over with.

Sasha came up on the turnoff to her house and headed in the opposite direction. No way was she leading him to her front door. She had the perfect place to ensure the privacy they needed for the many things she wanted to do to him.

The man was built—it took all her restraint to keep from climbing his naked ass the other night. His tattoos took up an entire sleeve on his left hand and expanded to cover his heart. Black, swirling tribal symbols, exotic and mesmerizing like him. She finally got to see the color of his eyes—honey-

brown, flecked with green and gold. So beautiful.

But his cock had her waking up at night with her fingers buried in her pussy, calling out Niko's name. She couldn't get the itch he'd created scratched. In a desperate move, she'd picked up the phone at about three AM last night. She'd have slaked her hunger for Niko on her jump-off, Miles, but he didn't pick up. JD, her pink jelly dildo, went to work instead. But nothing helped, nothing doused the fire.

Sasha pulled up in the back of the warehouse the gang had used for meetings. Since they'd broken up, the place stood empty. The crunch of gravel signaled the arrival of the Range Rover. She hopped out of the car into the gathering dusk and headed for the door of the warehouse.

Niko's car door slammed. "Running from me, Sasha?"

What the hell is he talking about? Doesn't he realize I'm offering myself up like a buffet? Sasha chuckled. She unlocked the heavy metal door of the warehouse, pushed it open and stepped inside. Hot, musty air filled her lungs. A sneeze tickled the back of her throat.

She pulled on the chain for the overhead bulb. Bright yellow light illuminated the empty space with a hum as Niko barreled through the door. Sasha spun around. He stopped short and they stared at each other.

She took in his narrowed eyes, flared nostrils and heaving chest. Her body felt taut, strung tight. She needed his touch, needed him like nothing else, ever.

"Strip," he growled at her.

She creamed. Hot moisture eased out of her clenched pussy and slid down her thighs. Niko took a step in her direction and reflex made Sasha back up. He kept coming and she backed up until she bumped into the concrete pillar in the middle of the space. Now they were inches apart.

She got caught in the heated pull of his eyes and didn't see the knife. A flick of his wrist and her mini-dress dropped

around her ankles with a sigh. She stared up at him in nothing but gloves and \$2,500 boots. The knife clattered to the floor, but he didn't seem to notice.

His intense stare roamed her body. She felt like she was melting.

"Are you going to make me beg?" she asked. "Because I will."

He took hold of her left nipple, rolled it between thumb and forefinger and pinched it.

She threw her head back. A moan escaped.

"What do you want, Sasha?" His voice was barely audible.

Her tongue slid out to lick dry lips. "Whatever you've got."

Niko hauled her into his arms. She gave a low cry. His mouth claimed hers in a frantic kiss. Sasha opened her mouth wide, granted him every access. Her tongue tangled with his and she swallowed his moan. Rising on tiptoe, her hands went around his neck. He tasted like cinnamon, so fucking good. Niko bent and lifted her. She clung to him, wrapped her legs around his narrow waist. He palmed her ass. The cool concrete at her back did nothing to cool the fire raging within her.

Niko tore his mouth from hers. "This is going to be quick." He fumbled with his belt.

Sasha shook her head. "Fuck that, just make it count."

He dropped a kiss on her lips. A hiss of his zipper, then nothing else mattered, because he was there at her entrance. Thick, smooth and so hard.

He slid home and her pussy swallowed him whole.

"Yesss." A sob caught in her throat.

Tremors wracked Niko's body. His cock stayed there, inside her heat, nudging her womb. He took her mouth again in a fierce, wet kiss. She welcomed it and his sharp

thrusts as he began to move.

She rocked her hips into him. He made a harsh sound. The squishing sounds of her soaked pussy mingled with their heavy breathing as she fucked him the way he fucked her.

Sasha broke the kiss and panted. His thrusts came harder and faster. Her legs shook and she fisted her hands in his black T-shirt. Niko angled his hips to the left. A sharp thrust caused the blunt head of his cock to hit her sweet spot and she flew apart.

Her sheath contracted around him. Ripples shook her body and she barely heard his savage cry. She came. Sasha screamed and convulsed at the consuming fire. Damn if that shit didn't take her by surprise — she didn't scream, *ever*. She clawed at Niko's shoulders with her pink nails.

Her body went limp. Niko tightened his arms around her. She felt his come at her core, warm and silky. He buried his face in her neck.

"What are you doing to me, Sasha Forde?"

She tensed, but he began feathering kisses on her face and neck. She had no reply. This magnetic pull between them wasn't good. Not when she had the flash drive and he wanted it. He couldn't have it — lives were at stake.

So where did that leave them?

Right here. In this warehouse with sweat-slicked skin, where the musk of their sex mingled in the air. She tightened her hold on him, flicked her tongue out to taste the salty skin of his neck.

He took her mouth in an addictive kiss and she didn't want to move. Not from this spot, with this man still buried deep in her pussy, holding her so tight. She wanted this and she wanted it with Niko.

She squeezed her eyes shut.

Wrapped in the sensual embrace of a man who just blew

her back out while still fully dressed, Sasha did something she'd never done before.

She panicked.

CHAPTER 4

Sasha slid down the length of Niko's body and stood on wobbly legs. Was it bad of her to want to climb right back on?

"This was a mistake." He zipped up his fly and turned away from her

She stilled. It didn't matter that she thought it. He said it and she wanted to punch him. "What the fuck did you just say?"

He swung around to face her. "This, damn it. I didn't come here for this."

Son of a bitch. "And I did?"

He shrugged. "Well, you did say —"

"Okay, you know what? Fuck you."

"I believe you just did." He grinned.

Her gaze roamed the room. She needed to find clothes and leave before she dropkicked the idiot standing in front of her. How dare he call the mind blowing, three minute humping they did a mistake? Did he think she made this a habit, allowing every hot guy who made her cream with only a look to slide up in her? That he was the first only made her want to shoot him more. Fucker. "Gimme your T-shirt."

"What? Why?"

"You destroyed my clothes and I'm not sitting on my new car seats bare assed naked." She crossed her arms across her

breast.

"Why were you at Harper Royce's office?" His gaze left her face and started a slow trek down her body.

Crap, she'd hoped he wouldn't mention their mutual excursion. "Nunya." She locked her weak knees together and pressed her back against the pillar.

"Huh?" He frowned.

"None of your business."

He walked up to her. Sasha refused to back up, but damn, he was intimidating. Anybody else would be scared, but she wanted to grab him and ride him all over again. His strength and grit enticed her. She never knew she liked his type—dark and dangerous, with a hint of deadly—until she saw him. But he had demons—she'd watched him long enough the other night to recognize the signs. Those same signs stared back at her whenever she looked in the mirror.

Could that be part of the reason my body seemed to recognize him?

"I have questions, Sasha. You're going to answer them."

"Yeah? And who's going to make me, you?"

"If I have to, I will."

She bent as if to tug at her boots and slowly pulled out the Glock tucked inside. With one smooth move, she pointed it at his head. "I dare you to try something. I've been itching to shoot you ever since that night."

"Damn it. Sasha, this isn't a game." He actually made it sound like she was the crazy one.

"Good, 'cause I really don't play fair."

"I need that drive." He had on what she came to recognize as his serious face.

"Me, too." Sasha shrugged.

Honey-brown eyes narrowed. "Why do you need it?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"You're the most infuriating person I've ever met."

"Well, too bad. I've got the curiosity fuck out of my system. You're free to leave anytime."

"This isn't about us." Niko wiped a hand over his face.

"There is no us." She held his gaze. Maybe if she got him to believe that, she could believe it, too.

"I can't—we can't do this right now. Lives are at stake." He sounded a tad frustrated.

"Hmm, you don't say." Okay, she really enjoyed pissing him off, but what did he mean about lives being at stake? Who else's life depended on the flash drive?

She didn't get the chance to ask. The fucking linebacker charged at her. He bent, pressed his shoulder into her midsection and lifted her off her feet.

"Argh!" Her gun dropped to the floor and he knelt to retrieve it. Sasha pounded on his shoulders as he stood and headed to the door. "Put me down, now!"

"Not gonna happen." He swatted her naked butt. "You're a pain in the ass and I'm dealing with you my way."

Um, why did those words make her dig her nails into his shoulders and wiggle her hips?

Niko kicked the warehouse door open and walked out the building.

Outside was dark and deserted, but principle demanded she state the obvious. "Niko, I'm naked."

He ignored her and walked to his vehicle. They neared her car and she begged him to get a blanket she had in the backseat. She never begged. Her fists clenched when he dumped her onto the front passenger seat of his ride. He slammed the door and walked back around to enter on the driver's side.

Warm rivulets ran down the inside of Sasha's thighs. She squeezed them together. Even his manhandling turned her on. She shook her head at herself.

Niko hopped into the car and shrugged off his T-shirt. He

remained clad in a tight black wife-beater. "Here, put this on."

He handed the T-shirt to her. She pulled it on as he started the car and drove away from the warehouse. "So, am I kidnapped?" She eyed his harsh profile. He ignored her and she asked, "Where's my gun?"

"Like I'd give it to you." He kept his attention on the road.

"Make sure you handle her with care, she's very sensitive," she warned.

"Are we talking about you or the Glock?" He chuckled.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why would we be talking about me?"

He grinned and she wanted to punch him. Funny, she'd become such a violent person since meeting him. She liked it.

"You should know I have a team of people who'll be looking for me." Nobody would miss her for a few days, but she couldn't let him know how much she liked being next to him. Damn him for bringing up needs she'd worked so hard to ignore. And damn her for not putting up more of a fight. His touch zapped all her common sense—his nearness comforted her when she didn't even know she needed it.

"Let them look, they'll never find you."

"Ooh, sounds ominous." She'd give him one night, then they'd go their separate ways. Too bad for him if he expected to ferret out the location of the drive from her. Unlike her still-quivering legs, her lips were sealed shut.

They drove through downtown and onto the I-5. Sasha wanted to ask where they were going, but she bit her tongue and looked at him from the corner of her eye. Her gaze slid over his face and down to his strong hands gripping the steering wheel. Her body heated at the memory of him touching her.

Damn. She squirmed in her seat—time for a distraction. “What’s with the tats?”

His head swung around to her, then back to the road.

“Not that I mind, cause, I mean they’re fucking delectable but still...”

His jaw flexed.

“They’re gorgeous, you know that. When I saw them the other night, all I wanted to do was lick you all over. Trace your tattoos with my tongue.” Sasha licked her lips. “I could only imagine your taste then, now I know.”

“Sasha.” His rough voice drew her eyes to his tense facial features.

“Yeah, Niko?”

“Shut up or I’ll pull over and fuck you right here on the side of the highway.”

Heat flared in her core. “If that was supposed to scare me, you clearly haven’t been paying attention.”

“Don’t test me, Sasha. You might not like the results.” His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel.

“So far, I have no complaints.”

* * * *

Niko gripped the steering wheel tightly and gritted his teeth. She tested him and somehow he knew he’d fail. He didn’t scare her—in fact she seemed to get off on tormenting him. And torment him she did. The hardest thing he’d ever done was step away from her at the warehouse. He had to remind himself of what was at stake—otherwise he’d have stayed there all night, gorging himself on Sasha’s delicious ass.

He didn’t regret the spur of the moment decision to take her with him. The flash drive should be his focus, but his need for her seemed to override that. This ache he had deep inside for Sasha Forde could be dangerous to both of them,

but he wasn't nearly finished with her. She frustrated him and turned him on in one heated rush. He'd never felt the strange pull before, not even with Elina, the mother of his child. Elina, who he couldn't love, couldn't save.

He couldn't seem to get Sasha close enough. When he first saw her in his hotel room, he'd thought she was a contractor sent out by Vicente. He still had no idea why she'd been at the lawyer's office or why she needed the drive, but right now it was the furthest thing from his mind.

He shifted to ease his pulsing groin. She sat with her silken legs crossed, exposed to his eyes and imagination. Niko remembered the smooth satin of her skin, the slick tightness of her pussy. His throat felt like sandpaper. The feel of her contoured muscles wrapped around his cock had his body on a sensory overload. It felt like she'd been made specifically for him.

He turned off the highway onto a dirt road almost hidden from view.

She turned to him. "You're taking me into the woods? Do I look like the outdoorsy type?"

No, she looked like the type he'd have ass up on the hood of this car if she didn't shut it. He needed to think and he couldn't with her voice and her scent permeating everything. Her taste remained on his tongue like a brand. Niko swallowed, taking her essence into his body the way she'd taken his.

Shit. "We didn't use a condom." How could I have forgotten something as crucial as that?

"I know. I can feel you even now," she purred and wiggled in her seat.

His cock, already thick, hardened in anticipation.

"Sasha, I came inside you."

"I know that." Her husky voice dropped even lower.

From the corner of his eye, he watched as she sunk her

teeth into her lower lip. He stifled a groan. He wouldn't have to worry about Vicente, she'd finish him off.

"Sasha."

"I'm on the pill."

"Why didn't you say so?" He released the breath he held.

"I just did." She leaned back against the headrest and sighed, eyes closed.

Niko opened his mouth to tell her off.

"Unless you plan to give me what I want, I suggest you shut up."

He should've known better than to ask, but he did anyway. "What do you want?"

"I want more of you."

He coughed and his cock twitched. From the start she kept him on his toes. While he liked it and wanted more of her, too, he couldn't afford to let it rule his actions.

Cool breeze filtered in through the rolled down windows of the SUV and washed over his overheated body. The distinct scent of pine rushed inside. Tall trees dwarfed the vehicle as they rolled down the path overgrown with weeds. His vehicle's floodlights speared the cloying darkness, but Niko didn't need the guidance, he could drive this path with his eyes closed in a snowstorm.

"I hope wherever you're taking me, you have food and clothes." Sasha's eyes remained closed.

He had food in the cabin, clothes were another matter. She'd have to make do with sweats and T-shirts. Somehow, he couldn't see Sasha Forde in sweats.

"You'll be fine," he promised as the log cabin came into view. "We're here."

She opened her eyes and sat up. "This is yours?"

Niko nodded, put the car in park and hopped out. He walked around the car to make sure he'd parked in the alcove of tree branches designed to ensure the vehicle's

invisibility. Even though he was the only one with knowledge of the cabin's existence, he still took precautions. Sasha wouldn't compromise him. He knew that the same way he knew his name wasn't Niko Davaris.

With the car concealed, he climbed the three steps to the wide front porch and unlocked the cabin. He pushed the door ajar and turned back. Sasha remained seated in the car, perched on the edge of her seat, her gaze on him.

"What's wrong?" He walked back to the car and pulled the door open.

"My legs are cramping." She smiled like she had a secret. "You'll have to carry me."

Niko huffed and rolled his eyes. Leaning down, he scooped her up. Her arms went around his neck, she buried her face in his shoulder. He kicked the car door closed and used the remote starter to lock it.

Strolling to the cabin with Sasha in his arms, Niko swore he felt her sigh against his throat. Heat licked his skin and he strove to ignore it. He climbed the wooden stairs and entered the rustic cabin. It was the first thing he'd built when he got out of the hospital. The second, a renovated house, he refused to think about now. Even Maysin and Justice didn't know about the cabin's existence.

At the threshold, he paused and flicked the light switch at his left elbow. Sasha raised her head and looked around.

The one-room cabin with its knotty pine interior wasn't big, but it suited his needs. A red threadbare couch sat in the middle of the room with an equally used multicolored throw across the back. A king-sized bed, covered in simple white sheets, stood in the corner under the only window. That was it for the furniture.

The stove and mini-fridge sat in the space designated as kitchen, divided by the couch. His tiny fridge held all the essentials and the cupboards were stocked with cans of food

to last for months.

"You live up in this bitch?" Sasha sounded incredulous. Her eyes were huge when she turned to him. "You expect me to live like this for God knows how long?"

He bit back a smile as he made his way inside and dumped her on the bed. "You'll be perfectly fine."

"The fuck I will." She kicked out at him. He jumped back. "I need clothes and food. I need..." Wide eyes stared up at him.

"What do you need, Sasha?" Anything she wanted he'd get, Niko didn't question the motivation. The part of him Elina tried so hard but couldn't reach, recognized Sasha. Wanted her. Maybe already needed her.

"I need you."

CHAPTER 5

Sasha wasn't happy about it.

But she needed to remove the threat Johan Vicente posed to the Hughes. In order to do so, she needed the drive. Maybe telling Niko why she had the drive would encourage him to help her, because the only reason he took her was to get the drive back. Right now he stared at her like she was a glass of water and he'd just come in from the sun.

"What do you need from me?"

"What do you think?" She omitted the idiot part at the end. "I need you to take me back to where you found me." He had her running scared, but damn it, she needed to shut her mouth! What if he did take her back, then where would she be? Fighting him for the drive? On second thought, sign her up if it was naked wrestling.

The brief flash of disappointment in his eyes made her ache to touch him. He sighed and walked away from her, headed to the part of the cabin that held the stove, fridge and cupboards. She eyed his tight ass and groaned.

"You're not leaving here until I say so, Sasha. And I don't say so." He opened cupboards and peered inside.

"Be that as it may, sir, I need clothes. Now." She snapped her fingers.

He turned to her with a frown. "Don't mistake me for the little boys you run around with. I don't take orders."

She wanted to tell him he hadn't seen anything yet, but

instead she grinned and asked, "Do you know anything about the boys I run around with or are you fishing?"

He scoffed.

"Cause all you have to do is ask." He remained silent and she goaded him. "Come on, you know you want to ask if I'm taken."

"Nope."

She laughed. "Why, Niko, I think you just told me your first lie."

"We have Pork and Beans, corn and crackers for dinner." He arranged some cans on the counter.

"What do you mean *we*? I had no part in this mess." She scrambled to a sitting position.

"You'll eat it or you'll starve. Those are the only options."

"No. I could smother you while you sleep, take the car keys and drive back into town." She grinned and tapped a finger on her chin. "That seems to be the most viable option right now."

He shook his head and muttered under his breath. Sasha smiled and unzipped her boots. She was having fun, something missing from her life for a long time. Certainly not something she thought she'd find when she broke into Niko's place the other night. Now she debated whether she could trust him.

Options, options. She really should've included her team in at least some stage of this whole mess, but they'd all moved on to legitimate things. It wasn't right to tear them away from their new lives.

If she had, they'd have gotten the drive and she wouldn't have met Niko. That she didn't regret, not for a second.

"Niko?"

"What now, Sasha?" He turned around from heating up their dinner on the stove.

The sudden weariness in his voice made her soften her

tone. "Is there a way for me to take a shower or a bath?"

He nodded. "Yeah, it's outside."

"Outside, like an outhouse?" *Ooh, I like how I asked calmly without squealing like a stuck pig.*

"No." He laughed. "The shower is outside next to that window, but it's not enclosed." He pointed to the window over the bed. "The bathtub is next to it."

"Why do you have a bathtub? Did you bring some other chick up here?" Irrational, but she didn't care. She'd be the first to acknowledge she was a few cards short of a full deck.

Niko's lips curved into a smile. "Did you want to be the first?"

The thought of another woman in this place didn't sit well with her. Denial piggybacked jealousy. The same jealousy she'd never even considered when Terry, the man she claimed to love, was alive. Niko had to be punished for that alone. She looked around for something to hit him with, but the only thing close enough was the pillow and it wouldn't do any damage.

"I'd better be the first," she told him in an or-else tone. What the hell was happening to her? Where was all this jealousy coming from? She glanced around discreetly for her gun. The feel of cool steel always soothed her.

His face got serious. "You're the first."

Those three words shocked her like nothing else. "I am?"

He nodded.

Sasha couldn't for the life of her define the look in his eyes. "Why?"

"Why what?" He gave her his back as he removed a pot from the stove and placed it on the counter.

Sasha got up from the bed and walked over to him. The T-shirt he'd given her earlier dropped to settle above her knees.

His back stiffened.

"Don't play dumb with me." She crossed her arms across her chest. "Why am I the first? Look at me," she demanded.

He turned to her slowly.

"Tell me." She didn't know what she wanted to hear, but she figured she'd know it when she heard it.

"Look around you, Sasha. This is my space, where I come to be alone. I'm the only person who knows it exists." His gaze bored into hers.

She ached to touch him. "I know now."

He smiled and nodded. Her gaze centered on his lips. She wanted to taste him, wanted him to kiss her again. Normally she'd make the first move, but she waited for him to acknowledge the pull between them.

"You trust me to keep your secrets?"

He shook his head and held up a finger. "One secret, but yes. Somehow, don't ask me how, I trust you to keep this secret."

Something warm unfurled in her chest. He'd always looked dangerous, but she had no idea he'd be a threat to her heart. She couldn't help but touch him now. Her palm caressed his cheek and she rubbed her thumb over his delectable lower lip once. His eyes slid shut, dark lashes fanned out onto his cheeks.

"All of your secrets are safe with me," she whispered. His eyelids flew open, the heat in his honey-browns almost scorching.

Sasha dropped her hand and stepped back. Whatever was going on between them scared the shit out of her. It blazed out of her control, burning through her defenses in record time. *That shit will not do!*

"Okay." She took a deep breath to calm the fast approaching hysteria. "I need a towel and body wash, preferably strawberry scented. Plus toothbrush and toothpaste, don't forget the loofah."

"Everything you need is in there." He pointed to a door over by the bedroom area.

She frowned. "I thought that was the bathroom."

"It is." He pulled out plates from a cupboard and set them down.

Sasha huffed and went to open the door he pointed to. It was a half-bath, very spacious. Complete with shelves and shelves of bedding, toiletries and what looked like his clothes. Jeans, sweats and boxers.

She pulled out a yellow towel, matching washrag and a bar of Ivory soap. Not the Champagne and Strawberries collection from Vickie's, but she'd manage. Next she went to the medicine cabinet above the sink—there she found a variety pack of toothbrushes and an unopened tube of toothpaste. Armed with her supplies, she went back out to find Niko.

"Hey, what am I wearing?"

He looked up from heaping two plates with food. "By the time you're finished, I'll have some stuff for you."

"Would you consider going to my place in town and getting me something decent?"

"And leave you here alone?" An eyebrow arched.

"Listen, fool, I'm here. I promise to stay put, but I need my stuff. Now will you go get it or are we going to have a problem?"

He advanced on her, but she stood her ground. Some rules needed to be set right now. This had nothing to do with wanting to be near him or spar with him. Nor with any of the one hundred and one images flashing in her mind, each with them in a different stage of undress, her legs in the air.

"What kind of problem are you talking about?" He stood so close she could feel his warm breath on her forehead.

She stared up at him. "I can make your life a living

nightmare, Niko. I choose not to, so why don't you run along and get me what I asked for, hmm?"

"What did I tell you about ordering me about?" His gravelly voice caused her nipples to pebble.

Traitors.

She opened her mouth, but her words were swallowed up by his kiss. He thrust his tongue into her mouth and she sucked on it. The stuff in her hands fell to the floor. He groaned and angled his head to the right. She followed his lead.

Niko lifted her off her feet and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Her aching pussy rubbed against the erection in his jeans. Sasha whimpered and undulated against him. His fingers dug into the naked flesh of her buttocks. She tore her mouth away from his to drop tiny bites on his chin and neck. Niko's arms felt like steel bands around her as he rubbed his five o'clock shadow against her cheek. The rough sensation sent spikes of heat straight to her moist center. She wanted, needed him to soothe the ache.

But first she needed to wash up. Fuck!

She pushed away from him. He released her, but as her feet hit the floor, his fingers tangled in her hair. She looked up into his bright eyes.

"What do you want me to get at your place?" He cleared his throat, then asked, "Do you even have your key, isn't all that left behind in your car?"

Sasha smiled and went to pick up her boots from where she'd flung them beside the ugly couch. Seated at the edge of the bed, she turned over the right side of the shoe. The Loubs cost a pretty penny, thus they had to multi-task. She knew a very discreet Korean cobbler who didn't ask questions and did exactly as he was told.

Her thumb pressed on the indent on the right side of the heel. Out slid the secret bottom, along with a round for her

Baby G, a pink cigarette lighter and an extra set of keys for her car and house. She turned and offered the keys to Niko, who stared at her like she'd grown another head.

"What?" She narrowed her eyes and waited for his response

"Nothing." He raised his hands in surrender.

She winked. "That's what I thought."

Niko seemed to smile in spite of himself. "You're something else, Sasha Forde," he admitted grudgingly. "God help me, but I like it." He took the keys and headed for the door. "Take your shower and eat something, I'll be back soon."

"Wait, you're leaving now?" When he nodded, she asked, "What about your dinner?"

He shrugged. "I'll warm it up when I get back. I expect to find you here."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Sasha headed for what she assumed was the door leading to the back of the cabin. "I notice you're not asking me where I live," she said over her shoulder.

"How do you think I found you?" He headed out, but not before issuing one more threat for her to stay put or else.

"Penthouse One," she yelled after him. "It's the best." *Can't have anyone peeking through my windows.* She waited until she heard him drive off before she stripped off his T-shirt and wrapped the surprisingly luxurious towel around herself. Gathering her bathroom supplies, she headed outside.

The instant she opened the door, light flooded the back of the cabin, obviously from sensors. Dark woods yawned in front of her, but to her left stood the shower under the cabin's window like Niko said. The shower stand was almost as tall as Niko, and a huge white claw-foot tub sat off to the side. She wished she could take a soak, but not

tonight. Not any other night either. If she had her way, she'd be sprinting out of here come first light.

She walked to the shower and turned on the pipes, laying her towel and rag on the rack to her left. A shower caddy hung off the rack and she put the soap into it. Niko had everything for the shower outside exposed to the elements. She was kinda feeling it.

Sasha stepped under the shower spray and sighed. Damn, but she needed this. She felt drained, physically and emotionally. Niko might be the way to get the burden she carried off her. He didn't know who she was. In order to tell him about Vicente, she'd have to tell him about herself. Time was running out. A choice had to be made.

She bent and lathered first one leg and then the other. There was a chance Niko wouldn't believe her. Heck, she wouldn't believe her if she heard the tale she had to tell. But it needed to be told.

Her stomach growled. Right now Niko's mish-mash of canned foods looked like haute cuisine. She turned off the shower and grabbed the towel.

Sasha made her decision. She'd enlist Niko's help and if he turned out not to be trusted, she'd deal with him her way. She ignored the sharp pang the thought provoked in her chest and hurried inside the cabin.

After toweling off, she realized he'd forgotten to give her something to wear. Time to go rummaging through his delicates. Hah! She rubbed her hands together and entered the bathroom.

From a glance at the shelves, she could tell her linebacker liked the dark colors. She selected a pair of gray sweats and a black wife-beater. She'd have to go without underwear until he brought her some. A vision of Niko digging through her underwear drawer made her body spasm. Sasha clutched the sink. That fucking linebacker was going to be

the death of her yet.

But oh, what a way to go.

She pulled on the sweats and of course they were too big, so she rolled up the waist. It still hung low on her hips, but she shrugged it off, nothing could be done about it now. The wife-beater fit her like a dress. Her luck to pick a man whose clothes would never fit her. Sasha gathered the material in the middle of her back, tied it in a giant knot and headed to the kitchen.

Her body needed food.

Sitting cross legged on the floor beside the couch, she practically inhaled the food Niko prepared. The shit tasted amazing. Sasha washed it all down with a beer and then rinsed out her dishes in the sink. She made sure to put Niko's plate in the oven to keep it warm. Then she sat and stared at the walls. The quiet wasn't natural to her—she needed her music, her phone and her computer.

Damn.

Sasha crawled into Niko's huge bed and tried to think about what she'd tell him. Her last thought before sleep took her was she'd be better off with the truth.

* * * *

Who was Sasha Forde?

Niko stood in the living room of Sasha's high-rise condo and stared. The polished wood floors and expensive art reflected the taste of someone from Madison Avenue, not a tiny Glock-toting chick with a penchant for pink. Yet every piece of furniture in this house was the real deal and very expensive. This he knew for sure. Which begged the question *what exactly did Sasha do for a living?*

The place was immaculate, everything in its place. He walked through the house, observing Sasha's domain, until

he found the bedroom.

Now here was the contradiction, the room was a pale pink mess. Everything strewn every which way. He made his way to the ivory chest of drawers and opened them until he found her underwear. Niko's hand stilled as he reached out. He was about to touch Sasha's underwear. His cock couldn't get any harder.

Everything was lace, tiny and every hue of pink imaginable. Niko leaned against the vanity and tried to breathe. The fucking woman was going to kill him.

He grabbed the duffel bag he dug up from the trunk of his car and packed a matching set of everything. Next, he made his way to her walk-in closet. Again pink dominated the color scheme. He chose some leggings, some jeans, a few of the tiniest T-shirts he'd ever seen and a black motorcycle jacket with pink detailing. Then he went looking for shoes.

They were in their own closet, adjacent to the clothes. Niko shook his head. A walk-in closet for shoes, smaller than the first, but still. The shoes were displayed as if in a showroom. Not a sensible pair in the mix—each one at least four inches. He chose a pair of tan knee boots and a pair of ankle boots with red soles.

Niko headed out the door in a hurry to get to his quasi-hostage when her house phone rang. He stopped in his tracks. The answering machine clicked in after three rings and a male voice spoke.

"Hey, checking in. I'm at the base if you want to come through. I called your cell, but it goes to voicemail, so hit me back and let me know what you want to do. I'm down for whatever. Love ya." The deep voice signed off.

Niko went to the phone and checked the caller ID.

King.

He heard a snap and looked down—he'd broken a strap on the duffel bag. A quick grab of the pink iPod and its

charger next to phone and he rushed out.

Niko drove back to the cabin, kicking himself all the way. He shouldn't be surprised she had somebody. Sasha was a strong, sexy and confident woman. She tried to tell him, but he didn't want to know and now he felt like he'd been punched in the gut.

He banged on the steering wheel and caught himself. He should be glad. She wouldn't be caught in the cross fire when his time was up. And his time would be up. Sooner or later Vicente would find out Niko was alive. He'd come after Niko with guns blazing, so it was a good thing Sasha had somebody. He'd keep her close until she told him where to find the drive and then he'd send her back to her life.

He gritted his teeth. Back to King.

Darkness shrouded the cabin when he pushed the door open. Niko's heart rushed to his throat. He heard the quiet breathing seconds before he flicked on the light.

Curled on her side, a palm under her cheek and clad in his clothes, she slept. She looked so innocent and peaceful one would never guess she was dangerous. But he knew, he knew more than he'd like to.

He turned to the kitchen, careful not to make too much noise. The note on the fridge told him dinner tasted surprisingly good and his plate was in the oven.

Niko found himself smiling long after he'd finished eating and taken his shower. He stood at the foot of the bed and looked down at Sasha. Her pink bangs covered her right eye even in sleep, and her parted lips made him want to taste her again. He rubbed his chin. Almost as if she felt his stare, she shifted and opened her eyes.

"Niko?" Her sleep laced voice still managed to rouse his passions.

"Yeah, it's me. Go back to sleep."

"Come to bed." She lifted the blanket, moved to the side.

The single most important invitation he'd ever gotten and it came from a woman more asleep than awake. Niko didn't hesitate. He climbed onto the bed and slid under the covers. She immediately molded herself to him. A hand went around his waist—she laid her head on his naked chest and threw a leg between his. Her body heat singed him and Niko squeezed his eyes shut. He prayed his body wouldn't go up in flames by morning.

CHAPTER 6

In the gray hours of dawn, Niko came awake slowly. A soft, hot body wrapped around him and a knee strayed perilously close to his groin. He shifted and tried to extricate Sasha without waking her. She heaved a sigh and rolled onto his stomach.

He hardened.

Niko's fingers went to her hair—the other hand gripped her waist. The plan was to lift her off, but somehow he ended up holding her in place. He knew the instant she awoke—her breathing pattern changed and her soft lashes brushed butterfly kisses on his throat.

"Morning." The words rumbled in his throat.

She replied with a, "Mmm," and rubbed herself up and down the length of his body.

Niko gritted his teeth and tightened his arm around her body. *Down boy.* He had to keep reminding himself she wasn't his, she already had somebody.

"Sasha, look at me." He tugged on her hair.

She lifted her head. "What?" Sleepy eyes regarded him curiously.

"Who's King?"

Fear flashed across her face. "Did you hurt him?" She struggled to a sitting position and brushed her hair away from her eyes. "Did you hurt him? Answer me, damn it." She grabbed his arm.

"Who is he to you?" Niko couldn't believe they were having this conversation, but he needed to know. Right now, her tone of voice and the scared look in her eyes spoke volumes.

"Answer the question, Niko. How do you know about King?" Her nails bit into his flesh.

This side of Sasha didn't sit well with him. He strove to ease her mind a little. "He called your house phone and I heard the message he left. I never saw him."

The relief in her eyes was palpable. Who was this person she worried about so much?

"You didn't answer my question," he reminded her. "Who is he to you?"

She swallowed. Wide, dark eyes shifted away, only to come back to him. "He's someone very important to me."

His heart sank. Hearing her say it was so much worse than him thinking it. Niko stared at her. She stared back, unblinking.

"You love him."

She flinched and nodded. He flung off the covers and threw a leg off the bed. He'd thought it would be a good thing, but it wasn't. She loved somebody else. Fuck!

"Niko, don't move." She threw herself on top of him. They rolled until they hung half on, half off the bed. His arms went around her to keep her still.

Sasha grabbed his shoulders and held on. "Get back up on the bed."

Niko bristled at her tone. "Don't—"

"No. You don't." She pointed a finger in his face, gentled her tone. "Get back on the bed, please."

He sighed. "Fine, get off me."

"Nope." She opened her legs wider, trapping him between her thighs.

"Sasha—"

She shook her head. "Don't *Sasha* me. I'm going to talk and you will listen."

There'd be no getting around it. Niko nodded. He moved sideways until they were in the middle of the bed again. She remained seated on top of him and he felt her heat through the sweats she wore.

He grabbed the pillows, placed it under his head and looked up at her. She stared down at him, eyes earnest. The outline of her breast against her top drew his attention like a beacon.

"Can't help yourself, can you?" Her lips curved into a smile.

He ignored the dig. "What do you have to say, *Sasha*?"

Her face got serious. She took a deep breath. "I have to say King is someone I trust. I'd die for him, and I know he feels the same way about me."

Niko spoke around the lump in his throat. "Why are you telling me this?"

She stroked his cheek. "Because he's not a threat to whatever this is," she whispered, "he's my brother."

Niko blinked. His world tilted, again. He could never get his feet on solid ground with *Sasha* around. "Your brother?"

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, I have one of those. He's older and very protective, so I suggest you watch your back."

Niko tugged her head down until their noses touched. His hand trembled where it tangled in her hair. "Are you fucking with me, *Sasha*?"

"No." Her warm breath caressed his cheek. "I'm trying to get you to fuck me." She nipped his jaw.

Did she have any idea what she was asking? There'd be no going back, for either of them. "I don't share and I'm very possessive." A mixture of fear, desire and anticipation made his voice tremble. He cupped her face in his hands, forced

her to look at him. "I need to know you want this as much as I do." No matter what happened when they left this bed, she'd be his.

She sat up and pulled her top over her head. Her naked breasts swayed with the movement. "You know what I want," she said in that husky timbre. "Quit stalling and give it to me." She leaned down, licked his chest, then sunk her teeth into his flesh.

"Ah, fuck." His fingers tightened in her hair.

Sasha soothed the bite with tiny kisses, then lifted her head to look at him. He took her lips. Their tongue danced around each other while he pulled down her pants with one hand and she struggled to do the same with his boxers. He lifted his hips off the bed to give her better access. Sasha broke the kiss and moved away to tug the boxers down his legs and off. She kicked away the pants tangled around her ankles before she climbed back on top of him.

They groaned in unison when their naked bodies connected. Niko wrapped his arms around her. He buried his nose in the crook of her neck and inhaled her crisp, clean scent. His senses were on overload, his head spun and his heart raced. Sasha did a number on him.

She opened her thighs and his cock settled between them like it belonged. The moist heat scorched him. His eager cock jerked. Niko flipped her over onto her back. His mouth covered her soft gasp as his hand blazed a trail from the smooth brown valley between her breasts to the softness of her bald pussy. He didn't get a chance to play with her body before. Now he took it. He sat back on his haunches. Niko used the index and thumb on his left hand to open the dark outer lips of her pussy while he slid the index on his right into her tight pink hole. Her cunt welcomed his finger with a kiss of cream.

Sasha bucked. "Fuck, omigod. Niko." His name was a

shriek as she gripped the sheets and lifted her hips.

Urgent need to plunge into her heated cunt tucked his balls up under a cock ready to slice steel. He pulled his finger out and thrust back in, harder, deeper. She arched her back and rose up on her heels. Her muscles contracted around his digit, moisture coated it.

Niko groaned and licked his lips. The ache in his groin pulsed in time to the steady clip of his heart. He needed a taste of her.

He stretched out on his stomach between her legs. His finger continued to pump in and out. The scent of ocean and arousal teased his nostrils. Strangled sounds came from her throat. His thumb brushed over her clit once, twice. She moaned. He pulled the hood back, exposing the hardened pink nub. He flicked it with his tongue. Her moans escalated. He sucked her clit into his mouth and her thighs clamped down around his head. Her taste, creamy peach, exploded on his tongue.

Damn. Niko growled and buried his face, nose to chin, in her pussy. He lapped at her cream, loathe to let a drop escape.

“Oh, shit, Niko. Shit.” She cursed him. Her hips rolled.

He flicked her clit, then sucked it into his mouth again. Sliding his tongue all the way down her slit, he replaced his finger. He licked and sucked and devoured her sweetness. Niko had never tasted anything as mouthwatering as the woman writhing on his face. She was an all-you-can-eat buffet and he was fucking starved.

Precum seeped out of his throbbing cock, but he wanted Sasha to come. He reinserted two fingers into her pussy, stretched her. She gasped. Niko looked up at her. Her eyes were closed, nose flared. Agony and ecstasy were spelled out in her grimace. Sweat painted her face and neck a glossy sheen.

No one could say she wasn't his, that she didn't belong here, with him.

"Scream for me. I want to hear you scream." His fingers were buried in her all the way to the last knuckles. He twisted his wrist gently until his palm faced up and then he scraped against the spongy walls.

"Scream for me, baby. Scream my name." His thumb pressed on her clit.

"No, no." Her head thrashed back and forth on the pillows.

"Yes, damn you, yes." Niko slid his fingers out and thrust in harder.

Her hand reached down, shackled his wrist. He thought to stop him, but instead she guided him in and out of her sopping tightness. Squishing sounds emanated from her weeping hole.

"Yes," she hissed. "Like that. Fuck. Harder, harder."

He gave her what she wanted, each thrust harder than the last. The force of it rammed her head into the padded headboard, but she didn't seem to notice. Her limbs were spread every which way, mouth hung open and her hands once again gripped the sheets.

"Yes. Oh, God. Fuck. I'm coming. Shit, shit, Niko." She screamed his name. Beautiful music to his ears. Her pussy contracted painfully around his fingers. A rush of moisture bathed his fingers and eased out of her soaked center.

Her body bowed under the force of her climax. Niko fucked her with his fingers. He kept thrusting until her gasps quieted and her spasms petered out, then he dropped an openmouthed kiss on her pussy. He licked his fingers, savored her exotic taste one more time, before he went to lie beside her.

* * * *

Shaking and not just physically, Sasha turned on to her side to face Niko. Their eyes met. Could he see her surprise and fear in the dim light? He'd turned her into a screamer overnight. Not good. She grabbed him behind his neck, pulled him toward her. Rough, but his growl said he liked it. She captured his firm lips with hers. Her tongue flicked over the rim of his mouth, then dragged down his chin. The sweet and tangy taste of her juices elicited a deep moan—she liked it as much as he did.

She came back to his lips and he opened for her. With a leg thrown over his waist, she eased on top of him. His rock hard cock bumped her throbbing clit. Their lips clung together as she rocked her pelvis into him. Her slippery slit rubbed over his pulsing cock. Niko groaned into her mouth. A slow rotation of her hips and he strained to slide into her. Sasha moved away with a smile. He bucked against her in an unspoken plea. She moved against him again and his blunt head slid inside her wetness. Fire sizzled along her already frayed nerve endings.

Niko's breath hitched. She broke the kiss and lifted up on her elbows. Her breasts hovered over his mouth. He leaned in, taking the right nipple into his mouth.

Sasha moaned and lifted her lower half up and off his cock. Niko clamped a hand on her waist as he bit down on her nipple.

Delicious pleasure-pain circled the base of her spine. "Fuck." She shuddered. Her pussy contracted. Niko surged up and she rotated her hips on the very tip of his cock.

"Sasha." His mouth hung open and his head fell back on to the pillow.

She slid down his length. A long drawn out moan left her throat. Her pussy walls wrapped around him, molded to him. Niko's hands dug into the mattress. She lifted up again,

taking her time until only the tip of him was inside her tight clasp. Then she repeated the rotating thing, sending sparks racing up and down her spine.

Sasha eased up and slammed down. They both cried out. His cock slid deep inside her, knocked on the door to her womb. She stilled. Her body quivered and rippled. Niko sat up and positioned her so her butt rested against his thighs and her legs were on either side of his body. Her nipples grazed his chest, slippery with sweat. The new position sent him even deeper into her. She bit her lip, met his eyes narrowed in concentration. Beads of sweat dripped off his temple. His gorgeous face was all sharp lines. He'd never looked more beautiful. More hers.

Niko leaned forward and took her lips. She kissed him back feverishly. Her hands went to his shoulders for purchase as she moved over him, gyrating in slow motion. He growled. Strong hands left their anchor at her waist and palmed the globes of her ass. Niko lifted her up. He deepened the kiss as he slammed her down on his cock.

Multi-colored stars burst behind her eyelids. She screamed into his mouth as she came. Her hips sped up as she rode the wave of her climax. Her pussy fluttered, squeezed the cock thrusting up on her down-stroke. Nails dug into his shoulders. He surged upward, slammed her down a second time.

"Sasha!" Her name bounced off the cabin walls as he came, emptied himself deep inside her.

Sasha's body went pliant—she would've collapsed if Niko hadn't tightened his hold on her waist. She locked her ankles around him, laid her head on his damp shoulder. The now familiar musk of their combined scents teased her nostrils. Contentment reared up, but she pushed it down. She couldn't help feeling like she'd become a willing prisoner, locked inside the heat and sensuality their nearness created.

Nothing existed when they touched, nothing but them. It couldn't last. The thought of getting away from it, from Niko, made her eyes sting.

Sasha drew back and looked at him. Black lashes fanned out on his cheeks, the rugged lines on his face remained. She sunk her teeth into his bottom lip. His eyes popped open, stared into hers.

He looked like she felt. Scared.

CHAPTER 7

Sasha came awake on a moan. If her dreams were anything to go by – a tattooed god had fucked her like she'd never been fucked before.

Mmm. Her pussy pulsed and tingled. With her eyes closed, she tried squeezing her thighs together, but the ache wasn't going away. She flipped onto her back as her right hand traveled down her body and dipped between her legs.

She grew sopping wet when she pinched her clit. The pleasure lifted her hips off the bed. A needy moan escaped her parted lips. Her left leg moved restlessly against the sheets. She used her middle finger to trace her hole and together with her index, pushed it inside her.

"Ahh, fuck." A tremor started in her right leg, eyes rolled back behind closed eyelids. She withdrew her fingers, then plunged them back in. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as her pussy massaged her foraging fingers.

Damn. Her hips rolled and sent her fingers deeper. The sensations became too intense, too fast. She stilled her movements to prolong it.

"Don't stop."

Her eyes flew open at the harsh words. Well, well. Niko knelt at the edge of the bed, staring at the hand between her legs. His mouth was set in a grim line, his chest bare. Yum. The activities of last night came flooding back, and with them even more wetness from her pussy.

Sasha withdrew her fingers and rubbed her clit in circular motions. Her breath caught in her throat as a wave of pleasure washed over her. Niko's Adam's apple bobbed up and down when he swallowed. Sweat shone on his forehead and nose. She loved this, the reactions she got from him.

"Inside. Put it inside," he rasped.

He brought his face closer to her center. Sasha lifted her knees, giving him better access. She dipped first her index, then middle finger into her pussy.

He gulped.

She rammed her fingers in, all the way to the knuckle. They both groaned as one. Her tight muscles squeezed her fingers as she sought, and found, the ridge at the top. A scrape against it had her calling his name.

His eyes flew to hers, held her captive as her legs shook and her body vibrated. Fierce possession dominated his gaze. Sasha licked her lips and pressed against the ridge. Liquid fire scorched her core and raced up her body.

"Niko." His name left her lips once more before the fire consumed her. Her fingers worked faster and faster between her legs. Sweet tension shook her body, made her chest heave. Still his eyes remained on hers. The pressure she applied to her G-spot sent a white-hot climax racing through her. She convulsed and the next thing she knew, Niko had replaced her fingers with his mouth.

She screamed then. He speared her contracting pussy with his tongue, and she bucked and writhed beneath him. Slurping noises echoed in the room as he lapped her juices, licked her cream and sucked her like a mad man. Sasha clutched his head and humped the tongue inserted deep inside her.

"Fuck, oh shit!" Overly sensitized from last night, the pain of her well-used cunt mixed with the pleasure. She tried moving away from his sinful mouth. He grabbed hold

of her ass, pulled her harder against his mouth. Her body quivered. She sobbed his name, opened her legs wider and lifted her hips to meet his onslaught. He growled against her skin, sucked her sensitive clit into his mouth. Gently, he nipped, then sucked some more, this time with added pressure.

Sasha arched off the bed. She came again and Niko was right there, drinking it all up. Her bones liquefied. Now a quivering mass of nerve endings, she flopped back onto the bed. Niko laid his head on her trembling thighs and rubbed his palm over her stomach in circular motions.

Sasha smothered the shit-eating grin threatening to spread—she needed out of here and she needed out now. The ground underneath her feet had shifted, walls were closing in. Fear replaced the post-climax shiver down her spine. Propping herself up on her elbows, she looked down at Niko. He stared back.

“What time is it?” She broke eye contact and craned her neck to peer out the window behind her.

“It’s almost midday.” His voice rumbled. He sat up and regarded her solemnly. “Are you hungry?”

Sasha shook her head. She spied her clothes on the floor beside the bed and leaned over to pick up his wife beater. Tugging it over her head, she moved off the bed, away from him. She stood and pulled the top down over her hips. He watched silently.

She licked her lips and faced him. “I need to leave.” Fuck, her voice cracked on the last word.

“Why?” He crossed his arms across his smooth, muscled chest and waited for her reply.

Why? What the hell was he sniffing? Sasha’s gaze centered on those show-stopping tattoos. She didn’t get the chance to lick them, trace them with her tongue. She swallowed. *Get your head back in the game. This is just a minor*

setback.

"I have a life," she said. "I have family, friends and responsibilities." A lift of her chin. "I can't stay here and be your plaything for however long you feel the urge."

His mouth twisted as he rose from the bed. "Is that what you think I'm doing?"

Sasha tore her gaze away. "I don't know what you're doing. I don't even know what I'm doing." She turned and walked outside. On the porch, she placed both hands on the rail and stared up at the overcast sky. Angry looking clouds rolled in on the horizon. A heavy wind rustled the low hanging branches of nearby trees. Brightly colored leaves blanketed the walkway and porch steps. She closed her eyes and inhaled the scent of pine and impending rain.

This was so not fair. She finally found someone who made her want, made her need, and she had to give him up. The flash drive had to remain her focus. Her family and friends' lives depended on her getting this right. For her to save them, Niko must lose. And then where would they be? Where would she be but out in the cold? It hurt, especially because she wasn't even aware she needed anyone. Two seconds in the same room with Niko and she yearned. She'd never done that before. Felt so strongly, so quickly. The man she was supposed to love, to marry, must be spinning in his grave.

One taste of Niko and she felt more for him than she ever did for Terry. Ten years she'd been with him, all those years he'd loved her. Niko was fast erasing his memories. Taking over where she hadn't allowed Terry to gain a foothold. Her heart. She'd sent him to his death, and now this. What was one more betrayal heaped on so many?

The cabin door slammed behind her. She flinched, but didn't turn around.

"Do you really want to leave?" Strain gave Niko's voice a

sharp edge.

She nodded. "Yes," she whispered, eyes closed.

"Why?"

What should she say? *You scare me? You make me forget who I am?*

She turned to face him. He stood there with only a pair of gray sweats on. They rode low on his hip. The clearly defined Vee-cut of his deep waist made her want to drop to her knees before him.

"Why, Sasha?"

She looked into his bleak eyes. "I don't belong here." She waved a hand at the cabin. "I don't belong—"

"With me?" He scowled fiercely.

She blinked and nodded. Her eyes slid away from him. He grasped her chin, forced her back to him. Another thing that made him different than the rest—anybody else would've been shot already.

"Tell me," he said. "Tell me why you shouldn't be here with me."

"Are you kidding? We want different things," she reminded him. "The only reason I'm here is because you want the flash drive."

He shook his head, waved her words away. "Right now I couldn't care less about the fucking drive. Tell me what you want."

"What?"

"You say we want different things. I know what I want, tell me yours."

Here was the opportunity to drive her point home, make him understand she didn't want him. She took it. "I want to go back to the night before I met you." Hurt flashed in his eyes for an instant. She pushed harder. "I want to forget about you and get on with my life."

"Liar." He stared at her, unblinking.

She frowned. "What?"

"You're such a liar, Sasha." He smiled crookedly. "I was there, in the warehouse. The instant I slid up into that tight pussy, I felt it, and so did you."

Un-fucking-believable. "I don't know what you're talking about." Deny, deny, deny. Wasn't it a former president who said that?

The arrogant fuck laughed out loud. "No? You say that while standing there with my bite marks on your skin and my scent seeping from your pores." He took a step toward her.

Sasha's teeth clenched at the need to back up, to turn tail and run. *Damned if I'll allow him to turn me into a coward.*

"When was the last time somebody made you scream, besides me?" His bite-me lips curved, an eyebrow arched. "I make you scream, Sasha, and every time you do there's a look of wonder on your face. Like you can't believe you're doing it."

Caught out there. "And what does that prove? So you're the only man to make me scream, big deal." She bluffed poker-style.

"It is a big deal." He cupped her cheek. "You don't let your guard down, nothing takes you by surprise."

Her eyes flew to his, only to close swiftly at the naked emotion on display.

Damn him. Why was he doing this to her? She needed her gun, since she'd apparently orgasmed her good sense away. The feel of the cold steel would remind her of her priorities.

"You threw me for a loop that night in my room. I couldn't understand how I could want to kill you and fuck you at the same time." His thumb brushed her bottom lip. "Before the warehouse, I hadn't had sex in almost three years."

Her eyes popped open. "Say what now?"

He grinned wryly and shrugged. "I've been busy and there wasn't anybody interesting enough to tempt me, until you broke into my room. Then I couldn't stop thinking about what it would be like to make you come."

Motherfuck, she creamed. Was this guy for real? She clenched her pussy, but got even more aroused. Sasha moaned low in her throat, then caught herself. She had to remember to stay on point. Discourage him, not make him want to fuck her again. Right?

She cleared her throat. "Well, now you know. So why don't we just call it a day, hmm? Take me back to where you found me and chalk all this up to a nice detour."

"Is that really what you want, Sasha?" Niko dropped his hands to his sides.

His muscles rippled and she stared, hypnotized.

"Let me tell you what I want," he said. "I want you naked in my bed. I want to hear you scream my name over and over. I want that ass of yours in the air as I fuck you. I want to feel your tight pussy squeezing me into orgasm, again and again. I hunger for you, Sasha, the same way I know you hunger for me."

God. Her knees buckled. She grabbed the porch railing, but he wasn't finished torturing her.

"I want to watch your face when you come. It's the most beautiful sight and it leaves me weak. Spend the weekend with me. Forget about the drive and stay with me." His gaze searched hers. "I want a lot of things. Can I have any of them? Do you want any of them, too?"

Did he realize what he asked? She wanted too much. Wanting got her into this mess, but maybe she could salvage her good sense. Back at the warehouse he'd indicated lives were at stake because of the flash drive. If she stayed, she had a good shot at convincing Niko they needed each other for more than a weekend of climb-the-walls sex. They could

use each other.

She took the leap, reached for the branch he held out. "Yes." It came out as a croak, so she swallowed and answered louder, bolder. "Yes."

His eyes lit up with heated desire. He lifted his hand, maybe to touch her face, but then he dropped it. "Tell me," he rasped. "Tell me what you want."

Sasha locked eyes with him. "I want you. Touching me, fucking me until I scream." Her tongue could barely form the words. "I want you to hold me, because I like being in your arms. Make me do things I've never done, I know I'm safe with you." She breathed. That wasn't so hard. She'd given away her control, yet she felt lighter, freer somehow.

Niko hauled her into his arms. Her hands went around him, to his back as he kissed her. She returned his kiss eagerly. Her hands roamed up and down his naked back and up to his head, caressing his tattoos. She'd get to lick them after all. A shiver ran through her.

Niko devoured her mouth. His tongue slid over hers. He sucked on her tongue, each pull soliciting a tug in her womb. She rubbed herself catlike against him. He ground his pelvis against hers while his cock stood at attention between them. Warm liquid flowed from a pussy weeping in answer. Her hands went to his ass. She cupped the taut globes and squeezed. He bucked in response. As if on its own, her left leg wrapped around his right.

He moved forward, walking her back until she was pinned between the porch rail and him. She arched up and he broke the kiss. His lips went to her throat. Niko trailed tiny bites down to the valley between her breasts. Sasha groaned when his tongue snaked out to lave her. Urgent hands clutched at his head. Niko tugged the wife beater up and took a nipple in his mouth. Her hands left his head to grip his shoulders.

"Ahh, God." The wind blew against her other nipple, hardening it to pebbles.

Niko sunk his teeth into the nipple his mouth.

"Oh, my fuck. Niko!"

He released her with a pop. The sensation of the wind against her wet nipple stole her breath.

Niko stepped back, the huge erection in his sweats quite obvious. "Are you hungry?"

The most difficult thing she'd done in a while was tear her stare away from his cock. "Ah, yeah. I could eat."

"Okay, let's go make breakfast. C'mon." He held out his hand and Sasha didn't hesitate.

She grabbed it and followed him inside.

CHAPTER 8

“What’s for breakfast? Matter of fact,” Sasha braked in the middle of the room and held up a hand, “think before you answer that.” She really wasn’t in the mood for his canned cuisine this morning.

“Don’t worry, I brought in some supplies last night.” Niko walked to the imitation fridge—really, she had boots taller than the offending appliance. He opened the fridge door to show her the food stacked in there, food she didn’t remember seeing last night.

“Where’d you get all this?” A pint of chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream perched precariously atop a tray of eggs. “That’s my favorite flavor of ice cream.” She looked at him.

Niko shrugged a naked shoulder. “I was at your house, so I raided your fridge.”

“What?” She sputtered. “You robbed me?”

“Hey, don’t blame me. You bitched and moaned about mine, so I got you yours.”

He was right, she did bitch. Sasha snapped her mouth shut. She couldn’t believe he took the time to think about her comforts when he didn’t know if she’d be here when he got back.

She smiled when what she really wanted was to run and hide. “What else you got in there?”

"Uh..." He bent at the waist to peer into the fridge. "I got some waffles and the opened pack of bacon, also the eggs and ice cream."

"Thank you." She looked into his eyes. "Thank you for this."

His lips curved. "It's no big deal. Judging from your fridge, you eat pure junk. How do you stay so trim?"

"My lifestyle keeps me fit, plus I think genetics play a role as well." Sasha removed the bacon, eggs and waffles from the fridge. She placed them on the counter and looked around for the pots.

"What's your lifestyle?" Niko asked from behind her.

Sasha stilled. Damn it, she'd known these questions would come. "If I told you, I'd have to kill you and we can't have that now, can we?" She refused to look at him.

"Keep your secrets, Sasha. But I promise by the end of this weekend I'll know each and every one." His breath rustled the fine hairs on her nape.

Sasha bit her lip to hold in the moan intent on escaping. She schooled her features and turned around with a wide smile. "Good, and while you're siphoning out my secrets, make my breakfast, too, would ya?"

She brushed past him and walked into the bathroom. After engaging the bolt on the door, she leaned against it. *Breathe, Sasha. You can do this, he's nothing more than a distraction. Think of him as a job.* She squeezed her eyes shut, counted to ten. Then, taking a deep breath, she counted from ten to one. This was such a mistake, agreeing to spend the weekend with him. At least today was Saturday. She had two more nights then she'd be rid of him. So what if the thought of never seeing him again hurt? It was her punishment for getting involved when she knew better. At least the deadline Vicente gave her hadn't come yet. Sasha had the middle of the upcoming week to produce the drive.

And she would. With or without Niko's help.

She pushed away from the door, went about brushing her teeth and washing her face. Things she should've done earlier instead of having her linebacker use his magic tongue to coerce her into staying here with him. Censorious eyes stared back at her in the mirror. She'd turned into a certified *ho* overnight, yet she couldn't muster up the will to care.

The smell of bacon frying wafted to her, reminding Sasha of Niko's primary mission the night before. She wiped her face and hurried out the bathroom.

He stood over the stove, naked to the waist, spatula in hand. Smooth muscles flexed whenever he moved. The swirling tattoos visible on his left shoulder performed a hypnotic dance. Her body called out for him, wanted to be near him. Right then, Sasha decided she'd put everything aside and enjoy this gift she'd been given. She stole for everybody else. This once, why can't she take something for herself?

She walked up to him and laid her head on his back, wrapping her hands around his narrow waist. Sasha pressed her front to his back. Niko's body heat burned through the thin material of the wife-beater she wore and made her sweat. Her tongue flicked out, licked his right shoulder blade. He flinched. She smiled and did it to the left. The spatula in his hand clattered into the pot. His head fell back as his moan reverberated against her cheek.

"Why are you cooking bacon without a shirt on?" she murmured. "You're tempting fate to scar your beautiful skin."

His body went ramrod straight. "I'm cool." And his tone was indeed. He shrugged out of her hold and picked up the spatula.

Sasha stepped away from him with a frown. *What the hell did I say to warrant such a reaction from him?*

“Where are the clothes you got for me?” She spoke to his back.

Niko transferred bacon from the pot to a plate on the counter with one hand, the other he waved behind him. “The car keys are in my jeans pocket. Everything you need is in the backseat.” He went right back to babysitting the bacon and ignoring her.

With a shake of her head, Sasha spun around and went in search of his jeans. She found them thrown across the couch. A quick search through his pockets produced the keys. On her way outside, she stopped with her hands on the doorknob.

“If I said something to offend you, I apologize.” He froze in the process of taking the waffles out the oven. “But if you want me here, the attitude has to go. There’s not enough room for it and me.” She walked outside without waiting for a reply.

Sasha used the remote starter to unlock the SUV as she hopped down the stairs. Cool breeze fluttered the hem of the wife-beater and teased her naked pussy. Damn. Who knew Mother Nature was such a perv? Leaves crunched under her bare feet, gravel dug into her heels. She tiptoed the rest of the way to the car. When she got back to civilization, she’d be spending serious money on a pedicure.

She opened the back door on the passenger side and climbed in. Immediately, she spied her purse. The last time she laid eyes on it, it’d been in her car. The same car she’d left at the warehouse. Sasha snatched up the purse and rummaged through it.

Everything was in there, her birth control pills—she’d forgotten about those, her cell phone and wallet. Even her backup Taurus .22, with the pink mother of pearl grips. She sniffed and attributed it to the weather, or some such bullshit.

A navy blue duffel bag sat at her feet, one strap busted. She bent and unzipped it. First came her shoes, then her shampoo and body wash set, then her iPod and its charger.

He thought of everything. All I had to do was complain and he fixed it.

At the bottom, below the underwear and clothes, was a comb, brush and her spare phone charger. She sat up, stared ahead. The gesture wasn't extravagant, but it touched her in a way she couldn't explain. He'd done all this before he knew she'd stay, which meant he did it because he wanted to. The urge to bolt reared up. Her toes curled into the carpet on the vehicle's floor.

Get far, far away from Niko, her protective alarms screamed. He represented so many things she wanted but couldn't have. The same things she'd refused when Terry offered.

Sasha reminded herself she could have him for a weekend. She intended to have her fill and walk away without regrets come Monday morning.

She hopped out the SUV and pulled out the bags. The remote starter locked the vehicle as she walked back to the cabin, purse on her shoulder, the duffel dragging behind her. Niko opened the door when she climbed the last stair. He stepped out, took the duffel from her.

She halted his movements with a hand on his arm. "Thanks again for getting my stuff."

He dropped the duffel and cupped her cheek. Gorgeous eyes bored into her. "I don't know what it is about you, Sasha Forde. I want to do anything to please you, anything to see you smile." His thumb caressed her cheek. "I'm sorry about earlier, it wasn't a conscious thing and I'll make sure it doesn't happen again. But you did nothing wrong."

Sasha swallowed the lump in her throat. A man who apologized. This guy couldn't be real. Again the urge to run reared up, but she knocked it down. She was a big girl – she

could have wild, toe-curling, climb-the-walls sex with a stranger and walk away unscathed.

Of course, she could.

"It's okay," she said softly. "It's already forgotten."

"You're sure?" He searched her gaze.

She nodded and he smiled, picked up the bag and stepped inside. She followed, stomach growling.

* * * *

Niko watched Sasha eat her breakfast. The terrified look in her eyes had faded slightly, but it still lurked whenever she looked at him. He understood it well. The instant she'd decided to stay, he knew this was more than a fling. She wanted to deny it. He could almost see the internal battle she waged. The same one kept him up half the night. In the end he decided to go with the flow, accept the gift he'd been given in Sasha. He no longer questioned why after all this time he'd finally found a woman who made him feel so much. He'd tried with Elina, but even though she'd been carrying his child, he couldn't forget who she was. Who her father was.

No woman had ever touched him the way Sasha did. She soothed his scars invisible to the naked eye. Niko didn't ever think he'd find someone like that. But there she sat, cross-legged on his bed. Exquisite beauty, touched with pink, Glock in tow.

His reaction to her comment had hurt her. He should've taken more care. It'd been three long years. You'd think he'd be immune to references to fire, burns and scars by now. He absently rubbed his tattooed arm.

Sasha popped one of her birth control pills into her mouth and drank the last of her orange juice. When she finished, she looked at him expectantly.

"What?"

"You're not planning on keeping me locked up inside all weekend are you? 'Cause I mean, yeah the dick is good, but I need more."

Niko burst out laughing, he couldn't help it. She really had no censor. "What do you want to do, Sasha?" He wiped tears of laughter from his eyes.

She frowned, got off the bed. "Don't ask me. This is your shit, you run this. What do you do when you come up here?"

"Uh, I'm not sure you want to know."

She stilled in the process of pulling on a pair of pink boy shorts decorated with red strawberries. "I'm pretty sure I don't, but tell me any way."

"I hike into the woods and just sit."

She stared at him. "Are you out of your fucking mind?" Her voice echoed around the room. "Do I look like the hiking type?"

He shrugged. "You asked." He wiped a hand across his mouth to hide his grin.

"Yeah, well, forget I did. I'll stay in here and stare at the walls, twiddle my thumbs until I lose my ever-loving mind." She stepped into her leggings with jerky movements.

"Aww, don't say that. You have me to play with." Niko couldn't help teasing her, she sounded properly crucified.

She sniffed at his words. "Yes, I have you and right now I'm contemplating where I'm going to shoot you first. Your crotch or between the eyes, dead center."

"Ouch!" Niko covered his cock protectively. "You're just violent for no reason."

"No reason!" She swung to face him. "No reason! First you take me against my will, then you trap me here with your thoughtful ways and that, that..." She clenched her fists and pursed her lips.

Niko sat back on the couch and waited to see if she'd continue her tirade. He recognized the source behind it, he wondered if she did. Sasha closed her eyes and breathed in and out heavily.

"What are you doing?"

She spoke without opening her eyes. "I'm counting to ten. It really wouldn't do for me to hurt you, yet. I have an itch and you're the only one who can scratch it."

He grinned like a fool. "Really, you make me blush. It's nice of you to recognize my worth."

A ferocious glare directed at him made him bite his lip. Sasha pulled off the black wife beater and drew on a tight white tank top. The material clung to her breasts and accentuated their shape. The top reached above her belly button, her leggings barely covered her round ass. Niko's cock stirred. A body that screamed sex, made for him to explore. Did she have any idea of the image she presented?

She walked past him to check the status on the phone she'd put to charge earlier. Apparently, she was in a hurry to get in contact with someone. He didn't care who she called, as long as she remained here with him.

"Finally!" She snatched up the BlackBerry and began punching in numbers. Cross legged, she sank to the floor with the phone to her ear.

Looking on, Niko never felt more relaxed. His boys would love this. Maysin and Justice bugged him for three years to get laid. They swore he was too uptight, he needed to release some tension. Well, he released some and he gained more.

Sasha muttered to herself over in the corner. Finished checking her messages, she turned to him. "I have to make some calls."

Is she asking permission? And why does the thought heat my blood unlike anything else?

Niko nodded. "Do what you've got to." He controlled his impulse to smile at the flash of relief in her eyes. Something told him if he'd said no, she'd do her bitch and moan routine, but in the end she'd comply. Some pair they made.

She pressed a button on the phone and put it to her right ear.

"Do you want me to leave?" He would if she asked.

She swung her head to look at him. "What? No."

"Okay." He rested his head against the arm of the couch farthest from her and stretched his body out. His gaze stayed on her as she spoke into the phone.

"Hey, King, it's me. No, I'm fine." She raised her gaze to connect with Niko. "I'm away with a...a friend."

A friend, huh? Well, at least he'd been upgraded from Itch Scratcher.

"Yes, it's a him and no, you don't know him," Sasha said to her brother. "What do you mean you know all my friends?" Her voice raised an octave. "Who the hell are you to say—oh that's right, you do know all my friends." She smiled. "Well, this one's new."

Niko chuckled. She really was something else. From the sounds of it, she had a close relationship with her brother. The closest Niko had to brothers were his partners in crime, Maysin Winthrop-Ferreira and Justice Alexandre. They weren't blood, but were closer than most. Which reminded him, he had to call them before they took to wreaking havoc in his absence.

"I'll be home Monday," Sasha said. "No, you don't get to meet him, he has a life to get back to and so do I." She spoke to her brother, but her eyes pleaded with Niko to let it be so. Like distance would somehow nullify the power of their attraction.

Niko held her gaze in silence.

"Alright." She took a breath, then asked, "Pat and Clay,

have you heard from them? Answer the fucking question, King." She swallowed and lowered her gaze. "Good, an e-mail is good." A trembling hand brushed the bangs away from her face.

Something was wrong. Niko bolted upright. "Sasha," he whispered her name.

Her head snapped up. Almond eyes glistened, lips quivered.

"What's wrong?" He reached for her, but she pulled away.

"No." She shook her head. "Don't. Please."

He dropped his hand and she spoke into the phone. "King, I'm fine and I'll see you when I get home." She forced a laugh at something her brother said. "You know I can take care of myself, right? Okay, love you, too." Sasha disconnected the call and sat staring at the phone.

She had secrets, his Sasha. Big ones, from the look of things. That made two of them. See why they were perfect for each other?

"Sasha."

She gathered herself visibly and looked up at him. A smile trembled on her lips. "Let's go hiking, Niko."

He frowned at the abrupt change. "Wha – are you sure?"

She rose from the floor in one fluid motion. "I said so, didn't I? You'd better hurry, this offer expires in five...four...three –"

Niko grabbed her around the waist and tumbled back onto the couch with her on top of him. He tugged on her hair to make her look at him, but she buried her face in his chest. She mumbled words he couldn't understand.

"Sasha, look at me."

She shook her head.

"Don't hide from me Sasha, please."

She stiffened and spoke, her warm breath sending goose

bumps over his skin. "You mean don't hide the way you do?"

It was his turn to freeze. She got him with that one. He cupped the back of her head and she drew back to meet his eyes. "If you want to talk, I'm here to listen," he said, "the same way I know you'll be there for me if I need you."

She blinked. The vulnerability in her eyes disappeared like it had never been. "I don't want to be coddled and consoled by you, Niko. That's not the reason I stayed."

"What's the reason you stayed?" He rose up on his elbows. She did the same.

"I already told you."

"No," he said. "You told me what you wanted. That's not the same thing."

She bit her lip and glanced away. Her gaze slid back to him, almost as if she couldn't help it. "I stayed because I couldn't leave. Being here with you is a big mistake, but I'd forever regret it if I gave up the chance to touch you like this." Her hand glided down his chest and abs.

Niko sucked in a breath.

Her gaze centered on his mouth. She leaned in, brushed her lips against his. "I'd regret not kissing you," she whispered.

His cock made its appearance known. She widened her legs and wiggled against him.

"Nobody kisses the way you do." She flicked her tongue over the seam of his lips. A wandering hand slipped under the waistband of his sweats. "Do you know I can come by your kisses alone? That's a first for me."

He moaned at her words. She plunged her tongue inside his mouth, settled a strangle hold on his cock. He lifted his hips and she tightened her hold. Niko surged into her hand. Sasha deepened the kiss. Their tongues fought furiously around each other. The orange juice from earlier blended

with the natural flavor of Sasha. She brushed her thumb over the wet slit on the head of his cock. He jerked, hissed into her mouth. Chuckling, she stroked him from the tip to the base, slow and steady. His balls tightened, electricity sparked in his lower back and spread.

Niko tore his mouth away from Sasha and panted, eyes screwed shut.

She cupped his balls. His eyes flew open. "Shit!"

"You want me to stop?" She squeezed him. Niko's cock pulsed wildly.

"You stop and I'll paddle your luscious ass," he gasped between breaths.

Sasha smiled and rubbed her pussy on his knee positioned between her legs. The crotch of her leggings was soaked. His right knee pressed into her and her eyelids drooped. Her lips parted slightly, the hold on his cock loosened. Niko stuck his tongue into her mouth. She sucked him in. Her hips rolled, body shuddered. The strokes on his cock came faster. Niko's hips moved in tandem. Sasha's thumb slid along the sensitive ridge below his cock head.

Niko dug his heels into the couch cushions.

Sasha's hips rolled faster and faster. She fucked his knee while jerking him off. Heat spread through his limbs in a wave.

"Uhh, fuck!" He grabbed her hair, twisted it around his fingers.

Wet and wild, they devoured each other. Her thumb caressed the sensitive tip of him. One more squeeze, a tug on his balls and Niko was coming like a motherfucker. He arched his back, pressed his knee into her pussy. Sasha's body stiffen, he heard her cry. She kept thumbing his cock, kept riding his knee. He emptied himself into Sasha's very capable hands.

They stayed in the same position, until their bodies stilled

and their heartbeats slowed. Niko blew a breath on Sasha's neck and watched her skin pebble. Her head lifted off his chest, the grip on his cock disappeared. She held her hand up. His come stuck to her fingers.

"Want to see another first?" she asked.

Any questions he had lodged in his throat when she brought her fingers to her mouth and licked them off, one by one. She held his gaze as she deep-throated the fingers coated with his come.

Mother. Fuck. It was the single sexiest thing he'd ever seen.

"Sasha. Babe." Niko's voice cracked. He swallowed and tried again. "Babe, you're killing me."

Banked fires smoldered in her eyes. She licked her lips and smiled like a cat. "Goes both ways, Browning."

She swung her legs over the couch and sat up. "Time for that hike you promised."

CHAPTER 9

"How much longer?" She sounded like a spoiled city girl, but Sasha couldn't help it. They'd been trudging through dew-wet brush for an eternity. Sharp twigs scratched the exposed flesh on her face and arms. The almost stifling humidity wreaked havoc on her hair. Because she had no sensible shoes, she wore the tan knee boots Niko brought for her. The heels on the Choos were almost four inches, definitely not made for hiking through Niko's woods.

"Not much further." Steps ahead of her, Niko didn't look back.

She sucked her teeth and shot daggers at his back. "You said that twice already."

"Did I?"

"I swear to God, Niko." She stopped short.

"What?" He eyed her over his shoulder.

Yes, what? I asked for this, so I have to grin and bear it. Sasha shook her head. "Hurry up, would you?"

He grinned and continued on.

In Sasha's opinion, they appeared to be going in circles. She swore they passed the same brush with clusters of bright yellow flowers, at least twice. Reaching out, she plucked one of the blooms and stuck it over her right ear.

Back on the path Niko followed, she quickened her pace

to keep up with him. He blended into the vibrant foliage with ease. Her gaze stayed glued to the army green shirt and black cargo shorts he wore. The brown Timbaland boots on his feet left distinctive prints and she stepped into them with her mud tipped heels.

She giggled. *I'm literally following in his footsteps.* Bugs buzzed around her ear. She slapped them away, wiped the sweat on her forehead with the back of her hand. Her mouth opened, but she closed it with a snap.

Enough complaining. This was the perfect opportunity to talk to Niko about the flash drive. She'd tell him why she needed it and ask him to help thwart Vicente. If he said no, she'd give Vicente his evidence and too bad for whatever Niko had planned. Either way, she'd be coming out on top. Her favorite position.

Sasha followed Niko into a patch of trees so thick she couldn't make out the gray sky. Her fingers curled into the back of his shirt as they came out on the other side into a wide clearing. The smell of pine and clean water filled her lungs. Niko stopped abruptly and she bumped into his back. Her hands went around his waist for balance.

"We're here."

She released his waist and went to stand beside him. A miniature waterfall, probably about twelve to fourteen feet, cascaded frothy white water over a moss green wall into a pool below. Huge rocks ringed the pool, some covered with moss, some without. Even though the sky was overcast, the water sparkled an enchanting turquoise.

She turned to Niko. "This is your place."

He nodded. "I come here when I need to think." He jogged down the well-trodden path to the water's edge, dropped the backpack carrying their snacks onto the ground and pulled off his shirt. Her gaze caressed his shoulders and muscular arms. Damn his fine ass!

She walked down the path, never taking her eyes off him. He undid the tie at his waist and unzipped his fly.

He looked over his shoulder at her and dropped the shorts.

She gulped.

He grinned.

Hadn't that fucker heard of underwear? His smooth, taut ass was bare. Her palms itched. She rubbed them down the side of her leggings and quickened her pace. As she got to him, Niko climbed onto a rock and dove head first into the pool.

Goddamn tease! He should know two could play that game. Sasha sat on the rock he'd stood on, and pulled off her boots. Freaking feet were killing her. She got up as Niko resurfaced, wiping water out of his eyes. After retrieving the bag of snacks, she went back to her seat and dipped her feet into the water with a sigh. The cool water felt like heaven on her aching feet.

Niko swam over while she peeled a banana. "Get in."

"Nah, I'm good."

He stood. The water reached about an inch above his waist. Translucent drops gleamed off his shaved head, smooth chest and perfectly sculpted torso. She licked her lips and took a tiny bite of the banana.

"Sasha, c'mon." Niko tugged on her left foot.

She wrenched it away from him. "Don't touch my foot, it hurts."

"The left one?" Concern reflected in his eyes as he looked up at her.

"Both."

He took her feet in his hands.

"Damn it, Niko. I said —"

He brought them to his mouth and kissed her cotton candy painted toes. The first contact of his firm lips against

her skin made her shudder. Her mouth hung open. Niko's eyes stayed glued to hers as he closed his mouth over the big toe on her right foot. His warm tongue swirled over it, sending sparks fluttering up and down her spine.

Niko switched to the left toe. His teeth grazed her flesh as he sucked. Her pussy unfurled, opened in wet anticipation. With an unsteady hand, she brought the uneaten banana to her lips. Instead of biting into it, she closed her mouth over it the same way he did with her toe. His gorgeous gaze widened. Under his fiery scrutiny, she deep-throated the banana in slow motion.

The sucking on her toe became more insistent. Niko switched between the left and right with frightening ease. Sasha gagged on the fruit in her mouth, but relaxed her muscles and allowed it to slide deeper down her throat. Niko lifted her feet higher in the air, ran his flattened tongue down the bottom.

"Ugh, damn!" Sasha jerked her feet away from his hold and scrambled away from him. Her throat constricted around the banana, choking her. She doubled over in a coughing fit. The offending food flew out. Eyes watered as she sputtered. Through teary eyes, she searched around in the snack bag for a bottle of water, quickly uncapped it, and took a long swig. Behind her in the water, Niko chuckled.

Fucker! He knows exactly how he affects me.

With her back to him, Sasha bent at the waist and pulled off her leggings. The humidity made the material stick to her skin. She heard Niko's sharp intake of breath. Her lips curved up at the corners. Looks like she affected him just as much.

She turned and walked to the edge of the pool in her pink shorts and tiny tee. Niko devoured her body with his eyes.

"Come in." He held out his hand and she took it.

She leaned down and he pulled her into his arms. He

hugged her to him as her lower body entered the water. Sasha's hands went around his neck, her legs around his waist. Niko released her to tug her top up and over her head. She didn't protest. The cool water felt amazing on her heated skin.

He trailed a hand down her back to cup her ass while Sasha peppered kisses on his jaw. Her nails dug into his shoulders. Desire made her body tremble, made her heartbeat stutter, made her ache for unnamed things.

Leaning forward, Niko fused their lips together as he sank down and submerged them in the water.

"Hmm." Sasha tightened her hold him. Tiny waves lapped between their bodies, soothing her. She kissed Niko back as his hand left her ass to massage her back. Her grip on his shoulder loosened. Cradled between her legs, his hard cock pulsed, but Niko made no moves to slake his need.

Sasha broke the kiss. Her fingers slipped and slid down his muscled back. She cupped his ass, squeezed. Rising from the water, Niko swam backward with her plastered to his chest. Ankles locked above his butt, she laid her head on his shoulder and enjoyed the ride.

The only sounds around them were of the waterfall and the splashes as Niko moved them about the water. His clean scent teased her nostrils, comforted her. Flicking out her tongue, Sasha licked a drop of water from his neck. At peace, when her world could crash down around her any minute. Stealing time, but she needed this. Raw emotion clogged her throat, had her feeling all wrung out. Want and desire was one thing. She didn't know what to do with need.

Niko stopped moving. She leaned back, looked into his eyes. Possession. Need. Desire. They colored his expression. Her heart lodged in her throat, gaze focused off in the distance.

"Don't do that. Don't look away when you see something

you don't like."

He doesn't get it. "The problem is, I like everything I see too much," she said in a broken whisper. Sliding down his body, she stepped away. Her toes sunk into the sand at the bottom of the pond.

"No." He caught her hand, laced their fingers. "Don't walk away." His clear brown eyes pleaded with her.

"But that's the problem, isn't it? Eventually, I *will* have to walk away. What's going to happen then?"

"I don't know. I don't think I'll ever be ready to let you go." He muttered the last part barely above a whisper, but she heard and her eyes brimmed.

"Don't do this me, Niko, please." She dashed away the tears with trembling fingers and treaded water until she reached the edge of the pool.

"Sasha. Babe, please."

Sasha ignored him. This was the second time he called her babe. Her insides melted like before. If she wasn't careful, she'd get used to this. Lucky for her, she had careful down to a science.

She finger-combed her hair and shook the water out of it. Staring up at the sky, she cursed Johan Vicente for putting her in this position. If it weren't for him, she wouldn't have been at Harper Royce's office. She wouldn't have witnessed Niko and his band of merry two taking the evidence. Fear for her loved ones' safety made her find him—otherwise she sure as hell wouldn't be here, feeling lost and found at the same time.

Strong arms wrapped around her from behind. A sob caught in her throat. For one sweet second, she leaned back into Niko's embrace.

"Babe, let's not talk about it. Okay?"

She wanted to tell him not talking wouldn't make it any less real, but Sasha nodded instead and moved out of his

embrace. "Fine. Can we eat? I'm starved."

He regarded her through hooded eyes, then nodded. "Sure, let's eat."

* * * *

Niko munched on an apple and looked on as Sasha explored the area around the pool. Wearing nothing but her tiny tank and underwear, she flipped her wet hair away from her face and crouched down to inspect the rocks and plant life. The yellow flower she'd pinned in her hair got loose and fell out during their water play. She looked at ease in her element, but the wild flare of her eyes gave her away.

What blazed between them scared her. It scared him, too, when he remembered it couldn't last. He knew his reasons, but Sasha had hers. Even though he said they'd forget about the drive, the need to question her knowledge of it remained. He still didn't know how she came to be at the lawyer's office that night. Was she there to steal it as well? If so, who sent her? Couldn't be Vicente, he didn't deal with women. He never shut up about his distrust and dislike of the fairer sex. He tolerated Elina only because she was his daughter, his only living heir. The heir Niko made the mistake of impregnating.

Niko shook his head at the path his thoughts led him. He preferred not to think about the child he'd lost, the grief would stifle him. Instead he indulged in the dream of making Johan Vicente pay for his many attempts on Niko's life, the last of which put him in a coma for three months.

Sweat broke out on his skin even though a cool wind rustled the nearby tree branches. He closed his eyes at the remembered heat and flames. His revenge on Vicente would be long and drawn out, much like the torture he'd ordered for Niko. Prison wasn't enough, would never be enough.

That's why he'd decided to break into the lawyer's office. The foolish woman seemed intent on making a name for herself. She'd compiled an almost airtight case on Vicente, all on her own time. Good thing Niko had Maysin on the lookout for anyone poking into Vicente's business.

At first, they'd attempted to block Harper Royce's investigation by sending anonymous threats, hoping she'd get the hint and back off. They didn't want Vicente spooked. How could they know she'd be too hardheaded to listen to reason? Justice, bloodthirsty to a fault, volunteered to have her meet with an unfortunate accident. Niko shot the idea down. He wasn't into killing innocent people. Not anymore. Besides, charged with watching her every move, Maysin had developed a near school-boy crush on Harper.

In the end, they agreed to allow her to do her thing and steal it when she was finished. No way would the evidence be made public. They hadn't counted on an informant hand delivering proof of all Vicente's illegal dealings to Ms. Royce. Through cameras and listening devices strategically placed around her home, they heard her excited conversations with the obviously disguised voice calling himself Angel.

Niko, Maysin and Justice waited a week for Harper to get all her ducks in a row. She'd finally gathered everything she needed to present to the authorities and promptly left for a romantic weekend with her boyfriend. They broke into both her home and work computer. There were no problems at her house—smooth entrance, quick exit. But the office, well, that wasn't so uneventful.

Niko focused on Sasha lying on her back on a flat bed of rocks, eyes to the heavens. She obviously knew about the informant. Did she know all his information was on the drive, too, since he'd been Johan's muscle, his enforcer? She couldn't know that for the past ten years he'd been cleaning

house for Vicente, meting out his sick brand of justice. Killing on his command.

Bile rose in his throat. He'd cast a blind eye to Johan's misdeeds for a long time, always willing to do anything for the man who'd plucked him from the streets. For his part, Johan treated him like a son until Niko bedded the boss's daughter. Everything changed then.

Niko pledged his revenge on Johan Vicente the instant he awoke from the coma. With a new name and face, nothing stood in his way.

Until the tiny lady in pink.

He remembered the vulnerability in her eyes when she spoke to her brother earlier. Something, someone else had her running scared. He needed to know who or what.

"Sasha."

She swiveled her head to look at him. "What?"

Niko smiled at her abrupt tone. "Come here to me." He patted the seat beside him.

"Is that a command?" She sat up, narrowed her eyes.

His gaze dropped to her chest. Chocolate-colored nipples stood at attention, evident through her wet-turned-translucent top. He licked his lips and popped a cockstand. God, he'd never been so hungry, so insatiable, for a person before. The few times he'd been with Elina, he'd been careful, always gentle. Now, he was anything but. The need coursing through his blood for Sasha was fierce, bold and rough.

Sasha took note of his stare and folded her arms across her chest. "Stop that." She struggled to her feet without the use of her hands.

"Stop what?" Niko clenched his fist. His fingers dug into his palm. He winced at the pain. Anything to distract him from the dangerous curves headed his way. The white top seemed to shrink when wet, so now it barely reached below

her breasts. Her smooth mocha-brown stomach was exposed to the elements and his horny eyes. The pink shorts molded to her hips and ass like a second skin. He'd never been more jealous.

She walked up and planted her feet on either side of his prostrate figure. Hands on her hips, she glared at him. "Stop ogling me, damn it!"

He grinned and yanked her down on his lap. She landed with a soft gasp. Niko leaned against the wall of stones beside the flow of water and pulled Sasha closer, her back to his chest. She wiggled her ass over his cock.

He clamped his hand on her waist to stop her movements. "I wasn't ogling you," he whispered against her left ear. "I'm loving your body—the way you move, the way you're built. You're amazing."

She shivered in his arms. "Don't say things like that."

"Why not? It's true." Niko licked the shell of her ear and was rewarded with a low moan. Her head rolled back onto his chest. His zipper bit into the tender flesh of his erect cock, but Niko didn't so much as twitch. He didn't want to lose the feeling of her lithe body pressed to his.

"Tell me about Sasha Forde," he said.

Her body stiffened.

He kissed down the column of her neck, bit into the tendons there.

She panted.

"Tell me." He reached around and pinched a nipple.

She gasped. "I can't."

"It's only you and me, Sasha." He kneaded her firm breast. "Talk to me."

With a cry, she pushed away from him and stood up. "God! I can't think with your hands on me. But you know that, don't you?" She flung the words at him. "You want my secrets while yours are safely tucked away." She rubbed her

hand up and down her arms. Anger and fear burned in her eyes.

"Sasha." He held out a hand to her, but she stepped out of his reach.

"No!" she snapped. "You *want* to know, you *must* know, right?"

Niko shook his head, shocked speechless by her outburst.

"Will it help, do you think? Will knowing I'm a thief make it hurt less when I finally walk away?"

They both froze at the words. Sasha's eyes rounded. She slapped a hand over her mouth, backed away from him.

"Don't. Even. Think about it. Sit your ass down. Now."

Her mouth opened and closed like a fish. She crossed her eyes, but finally sat down, facing away from him.

Niko inched closer to her. "Who?"

She shook her head and avoided his gaze. "I don't know what you mean."

Damn it! Niko grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. "Don't fuck with me, Sasha. Who're you afraid of?" He vowed silently to hunt down whoever put the terrified look in her eyes. For someone as confident as Sasha, something major was going on here.

She must've seen the out-for-blood look on his face because she brought shaking fingers to his cheek. "Never thought I'd be attracted to the deadly type."

His lips curved.

She heaved a sigh. "Okay, here's the deal. I don't care how good you are, repeat what I say and I *will* fuck that gorgeous ass up."

Niko bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. She really was too much. He nodded and waited.

"I assume you've heard of the Shadow Gang?"

Any criminal worth their salt have heard of the Shadow Gang. Heard of, because very few know who or what

comprised the outfit. Myth in the streets have them being led by the government. They stole things nobody else dared to. From coast to coast and even globally, the Gang was rumored to be involved in some of the most notorious heists of the past decade—from paintings in France, to jewelry in England and weapons in Japan. Yet they never took credit for anything. Every now and again, there were whispers doubting their very existence.

They were real, although Niko wished he didn't know. Yet another crime to lay at Vicente's feet.

"Why are you asking about them?" As far as he knew, the Gang's activities had dwindled since their leader, Terry Garraway, died.

"Cause I'm a member of the Shadow gang."

"What?" Dread spread across his insides, slow as an ink stain. "You're serious?"

"Of course, I'm serious." She frowned. "Why would I make up something like that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

Whatever she saw in his expression made her chuckle. "Here's another one for you. I'm the leader of the Shadow Gang."

"No, you're not!"

She blinked at his outburst. "Why the hell not?"

Niko drew a breath. "Sasha, you can't be the leader of The Gang."

"Again, I ask why the hell not?"

"The leader of The Shadow Gang was a man. I should know, I killed him three years ago."

CHAPTER 10

Sasha stared at Niko. “*You* killed him?” she whispered. Her lungs seized. She shook her head. “No, I don’t believe you.” No way could Niko be the one who killed Terry. That meant she’d been sleeping with the man who shot her lover in the chest and left him to die in the streets.

“Sasha, I’m sorry, but it’s the truth.” Agony darkened his gaze to an almost black hue.

Why is he in agony, did someone just shatter his world?

“No. You couldn’t have.” She grabbed his forearm with frozen fingers. “Maybe you think you did, but you didn’t.” Her voice trembled. “You can’t be the one who shot my – my –” Tears burned her eyes, but she ignored them. They slid down her cheeks and dripped onto her naked thigh. “You’re lying. Tell me you’re lying, Niko,” she begged. Her heart constricted in her chest. “Please.”

“Babe, I’m sorry,” he said, voice hoarse. His eyes glittered, his jaw set as if in stone. His hand covered hers where it lay on his arm.

“No!” Sasha snatched her hand from his. “Don’t you see what we’ve done, what I’ve done?”

His expression changed to granite. Cold, hard and blank. “I was doing my job, following orders.”

She smacked him across the face as hard as she could. His neck snapped back.

“Fuck your orders!” She jumped to her feet. “Your orders took Terry away from me. Your actions put me right here, at

a monster's beck and call."

He rubbed his jaw. "Which monster would that be?" His voice, low and smooth, portrayed no inflections.

"What the hell does it matter? You killed Terry!"

"It matters to me, Sasha."

"Why, are you going to kill him, too?" She baited him, but he didn't bite. He sat and waited. "You can't touch him, even if I wanted you to. He's smoke."

"And who are we talking about?" Niko cocked his head to the side.

"Johan Vicente," she whispered his name as if the woods had ears. Something like recognition flashed in Niko's eyes, but he gave no other indication he knew the name. "He knows about my role in the gang. He blackmailed me into stealing the evidence you put on the flash drive."

"Blackmail how?"

"What the fuck do you mean, *how*? The Gang is wanted in over five different countries, not counting the US." Suddenly chilled, Sasha rubbed her hands over her forearms. She looked around for her leggings and shoes. "I thought we were good since no one knew our identities, but last week I found out Vicente knows all about us." She choked back the tears. "He knew I took over when you – when Terry died. So he wants the drive in exchange for his silence and my foster parents' safety."

"Pat and Clay?"

"Yes." She shook leaves off her leggings and stepped into them.

"Why did you wait for me to wake up that night?"

"What?" She hopped on one foot and looked at him over her shoulder.

"That night at my place, you already had the drive. Why did you wait around?" His curious gaze held hers.

Yes, tell him, Sasha. Tell him you couldn't stop staring at his

naked skin. That you wanted to see the color of his eyes. Hear his voice one more time. Tell him how you wanted to crawl into the bed with him.

"I...aah...it doesn't matter now," she said through cracked lips.

"Let me be the judge." With a determined set to his jaw, he bade her, "Tell me."

Sasha turned to face him with a sigh. "At Harper's office, I saw your face, your tattoos. I knew how you sounded." She paused and cleared her throat. "But your eyes. I didn't know the color of your eyes, so I waited for you to wake up." A reckless move, in so many ways.

He stood. Sasha backed up. Niko stood in front of her, his expression shuttered. "You still had the opportunity to disappear without a trace. Instead you wanted me to find you. Why?" he whispered.

"I wanted you," she spat at him. "Are you happy now? I had to have you, and now here I am." Her voice cracked. "I betrayed Terry by sleeping with the man who murdered him." Nausea made her stomach roll. She spun away from Niko and bent to grab her shoes.

She put on her shoes with jerky movements and walked up the path into the woods, away from him. The shoes bit into her feet and she winced, she'd forgotten about that.

"Damn it, Sasha, wait."

She ignored him.

"You don't know the way back," he called out.

The murdering bastard was right. She stopped in her tracks, shifted her weight from foot to foot. Soon as she got back to the cabin, she'd gather her stuff and leave. The sooner she got away from Niko, the better. She couldn't think, much less remember her fucking name, when she looked into his eyes.

He killed Terry – she needed no better reason to leave.

"How's your feet?" he asked from behind her.

Sasha shrugged and turned around. Big mistake. His gaze snared her as he searched her face. "Ahh...my feet are fine, thanks."

His eyes narrowed. "Don't lie to me, Sasha. I saw you limp a moment ago."

"Then why the fuck are you asking?"

He opened his mouth, but shut it and shook his head. "Let me carry you."

"Oh, hell no!" The less time she spent in skin to skin contact with him, the better. She marched on ahead of him, only to trip over the wayward root from a nearby tree. She stumbled and would have fallen if Niko's strong arms didn't close around her.

He lifted her off her feet. "I know you're mad at me, but this doesn't make any sense. Your feet hurt, let me help." He set her back down.

He had a point, her dogs were indeed barking. Loudly. "Fine." Sasha sniffed. "How do you propose to do this helping?"

"Piggyback."

He stared at her, she stared back. His gaze dared her to say something, but what? Her body heated at the thought of being pressed up against him. The power he had over her body was shameful. Shameful.

She bit her lip and nodded. "Fine."

"Alright, hop on." He handed her the snack bag and crouched down.

Slinging the backpack over her shoulder, Sasha walked around him and climbed onto his back. Her body molded to his. She wrapped her feet around his waist, arms around his neck. He groaned low in his throat, echoing the rush to her blood.

He straightened. "You good?"

She nodded, then realized he couldn't see. "Yeah."
"Then let's go home."

Sasha ignored the hand Niko held out to her and marched up the cabin steps. The imprint of his back still clung to her front. He'd killed Terry. She needed to get away. From Niko, from herself. From the all-consuming feeling of betrayal. His.

Hers, most of all.

A sharp kick and the cabin door flew open. Pain shot up her leg.

"Sasha, let's talk." He grabbed her arm.

"Don't fucking touch me." She shook off his hold and entered the cabin. Snatching up the duffel bag from the couch, she looked around for her shoes. Time to leave this place, return to the real world and deal with the fallout.

She knelt to the floor and peeked under the bed.

"What are you looking for?"

"I want my clothes and my shoes. I want to get out of here," she mumbled from her couched position. The sooner, the better.

"You gave me your word you'd stay." His deep voice was low, controlled.

She looked up at him. A slow tick worked his jaw. "That was before I knew who you were. What you'd done to me."

"And just like that you're leaving?"

"Just like—" She abandoned the search for shoes and got to her feet. She'd buy more. "Am I going nuts here or did you admit to killing someone very important to me?"

Niko stood as well. "I apologized for that. There's nothing I can do to make it right, but I'm willing to try." He stared into her eyes.

Did he hope to convince her to stay? Nothing could, not now.

She shook her head. "You don't get it, Niko. You can't fix this, it's too bad."

He grabbed her hands, circled her wrists. "No, you don't get it, Sasha. I'll do whatever you want to fix this, but you're not leaving tonight."

"I'd like to see you try and stop me." She pulled away from his hold, walked away. Headed to the door. Two steps and she crumbled to the floor. Tears burned like acid on her eyeballs.

"Babe, talk to me." He crouched in front of her, touched her cheek.

"Don't call me that!" she screamed. "Stay the fuck away from me."

"I can't do that, Sasha." His voice was soft, too soft. He offered her a hand. "Here, let me help you up."

Bastard was cool as a cucumber while she drowned in guilt. Choked on betrayal. She pushed at his shoulder, but he wouldn't budge. Tears slid down her cheek. He brushed them away with his thumb.

"I'm sorry, Sasha. Please." His dark eyes begged for her forgiveness, but how could she forgive him? Who'd forgive her?

"Fuck what you are. I'm done with this, with you." She moved to stand, but he grabbed her waist, anchored her to him.

"I'm not letting you go, Sasha." The steel in his voice held a warning.

Sasha ignored it and him. She pulled at the arms holding her, raked with her nails. Niko winced, but didn't ease up. He buried his face in her neck.

"I can't let you go," he whispered. Emotion thickened his voice and infuriated her. He had no right to whatever he was feeling. She punched him. Fear left a copper taste in her mouth. She rained blows on Niko's head and shoulders. He

released her, kept his head down, but grabbed both her hands in his much larger one.

She struggled to get out of his hold. He pushed her down until she lay on the cold floor with him on top. His knee parted her thighs.

"Stop fighting me." Dark eyes held desire and the familiar fire. His warm breath fanned her face. All she wanted, all she felt was present in his eyes. Sasha closed hers—she didn't want to see it.

"Are you really mad at me, or at yourself?" Niko asked. "Something tells me no matter how hard we try, we can't escape this. You can't walk away, Sasha. I don't even think you want to."

Son of a bitch! She couldn't close her ears to his words, so she punched him in the side, hoping to shut him up. He pressed into her. She leaned in, sunk her teeth into his neck.

He hissed. "You want to play rough?"

She tried to scramble out from under him, but he kept her pinned and bit her bottom lip. Sasha cried out with the pain, but he swallowed it. She jerked against him. His arms went around her, held her tight. Her hand fisted in his shirt. He sat back on his haunches and pulled her up with him. She sat in his lap on the floor and cried.

"I'm sorry." Niko kissed the top of her head, smoothed a hand down her back.

Her mouth opened, but she couldn't make a sound. Everything bundled in her throat, kept it clogged. She buried her face in the crook of his neck, inhaled his scent of pine and sweat. He comforted her. She could brand him as the source of her grief, but she was equally culpable. The one time she took something for herself, lived for herself, she fucked it up royally. Selfish, she'd been selfish. Now came the rewards to reap.

Niko tugged her head back, pressed kisses to her cheek,

temple and jaw. Almost complete silence and he loved her, apologized with each touch of his lips on her skin. She kept her eyes closed.

"I can feel you retreating," he said. "Don't." His tongue slid over her cheek, licked away a tear. "Don't leave me."

Sobs hiccupped in her throat. His pleas echoed her thoughts, her wants. She should've learned her lesson by now. He wasn't meant for her, never could be.

She squeezed closer to him, flattened her breasts to his chest. Moved closer still, until air couldn't pass between them. That was her wish, but they couldn't stay like this forever.

"You're mine." His hot breath burned her earlobe.

She couldn't find the denial, maybe didn't dig deep enough in search of it. Either way, the rightness of his words rocked her. Her eyes flew open, collided with his. Terry's killer, her lover. The one she wanted. Needed with a fierceness she couldn't explain.

His possessive gaze glittered, mirrored the emotions stifling her.

Fresh tears flowed.

* * * *

He'd fucked up.

Niko glanced at Sasha lying on the bed. She'd fallen asleep in his lap.

I killed her friend.

He squeezed his eyes shut against her words. She made it pretty clear she regretted what they had. She knew what he was now. *An indiscriminate killer.* He killed Garraway. Under Johan's orders, yes, but Niko carried out the deed. Now as the leader of Shadow Gang, Sasha was under that bastard's thumb.

Niko rubbed the back of his neck. He needed to get in contact with Maysin and Justice. He had to let them know about the new developments. If she gave Johan the drive, he'd definitely destroy it. But that wouldn't remove Sasha from his list—he'd be an albatross around her neck. Niko wasn't having any of it. He had to remove Johan Vicente permanently. For Sasha. He owed it to her.

Niko had the element of surprise in his favor. Vicente operated under the impression Niko died from his last attempt on his life. Who could survive being trapped in a burning car and a fall over a cliff more than a hundred feet high?

A man with a score to settle.

CHAPTER 11

Howling winds woke her.
“I’m taking some time.”

Sasha popped an eye open. Niko stood in the bathroom doorway with her cell phone attached to his ear, a towel wrapped around his waist. His naked shoulders blocked the light in the bathroom from spilling out to the main area.

Another night had fallen in the cabin.

“I’m...out of town. Don’t bother looking.” He rubbed a palm over his head. “It doesn’t matter why. Don’t do anything until I get back.”

Sasha remained still and held her breath. This could be her chance to find out more about Niko. He already knew way too much about her. All she knew about him was he’d killed Terry and he wasn’t good for her sanity.

“Damn it, J!” Niko turned and re-entered the bathroom, but kept the door open. “This is different. Everything’s changed and if you do something to hurt—if you move without my say so, I *will* kill you.” He spoke the last words with icy calm, then hung up.

Niko walked out the bathroom and approached the bed. Sasha squeezed her eyes shut. He stood in silence. She felt his gaze on her face. And then his hands.

His brushed away the hair covering her eyes, then scrapped his knuckles down her cheek and along her jaw line.

Sasha's breath quickened.

"I know you're up."

Who the fuck is he, some kind of psychic?

"Come eat." He feathered his thumb across her bottom lip. She resisted the urge to take it into her mouth.

She kept her eyes closed. "I'm not hungry." Truth be told, her empty stomach was beginning to mold to her back, but he didn't need to know.

Niko sat on the bed beside her. She scooted back like he had leprosy. Worse, his touch was addictive.

"Look at me, Sasha." His command held extra bass.

She opened her eyes, huffed and sat up against the pillows. "What?" She avoided looking at his exposed chest, instead she fixed her gaze on an angle above his left shoulder.

"You'll eat." His tone was dead serious. "When you're finished eating, you'll take a bath."

Sasha rolled her eyes. "Seriously? What, you're like my father now?" She crossed her arms across her naked chest and chanced a glance at his face.

Niko's gaze heated. "I'll be whatever you need me to be."

"Whatever. Bring me the gruel, let's get this over with." A growl from her stomach punctuated the statement. She held Niko's stare, raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

He grinned and rose from the bed. The moss-green towel around his waist dipped. Niko didn't seem to notice—he strode to the kitchen area and flicked on the light. He set about making her a plate of whatever was in the pot on the stove. It smelled good.

Outside, the wind continued its loud ruckus. The window above the bed was open, but Sasha couldn't see a damn thing when she peered out into the blackness.

"What time is it?" she asked his bare back.

His muscles flexed when he shrugged. "Sometime after

eight."

Damn, she'd slept that late? "What's happening outside?"

Niko turned from the stove and headed in her direction with a plate piled high with something smelling spicy and a glass of water. "It sounds like a thunderstorm."

"Are we safe here?" She took the plate he offered.

He sat at the edge of the bed and smiled. "Yes, Sasha."

"But what about landslides, mudslides or whatever the fuck you people deal with?"

"You people?" Niko narrowed his eyes.

Leave it to him to pick that part out of her question. "You know, nature lovers. The whole one-with-nature type deal."

"I'm not a nature freak, Sasha. I like to be alone." He took the spoon from her fingers, dipped it in the food and brought it to her lips. "Open."

Sasha stared at the spoon. "Um, for my peace of mind, what am I about to eat?"

"It's rice cook-up," he said patiently. "Mixed with sausages and other stuff."

"Other stuff?" she squealed.

He inserted the spoon between her parted lips. She closed her mouth. Flavor exploded on her tongue.

"Oh, my God!"

"What?" Niko lowered his hand with the spoon to her plate.

"It's good. Amazing, actually." She licked her lips. "Damn, Browning. You can burn!" She smiled at him.

He smiled back, his eyes warm. "I'm glad you like it."

"Like it?" Sasha placed the plate in her lap. "I love it. I love—" She stopped while she was ahead.

Sasha bent her head and continued eating. She had to find a way out of here. It shouldn't matter that he treated her so good and serviced her pussy like a certified pro. He killed Terry. She had to stay away from him. No contact with his

skin, his mouth, definitely not his cock.

She scraped the last morsel off the plate and gulped down some water. He sat and stared. Sasha crossed her eyes at his smooth copper chest.

"Could you put on some clothes, please?"

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" His right pec jumped. Her gaze flew to his.

He grinned. "In case you forgot, you're naked, too. I haven't said anything to you about that, have I?"

Sasha pulled the sheet up over her chest. "That's because you're a horny perv."

"Only for you, babe, only for you." The gold flecks in his eyes twinkled.

Whoever told him he was cute? "Yeah, alright." She handed him the empty plate and took a breath. "It's not going to happen again."

"What isn't?"

She waved a hand at the bed. "This—this fire between us. Whatever it is, however we name it, it can't happen again."

Niko's eyes flashed. "You're ending us?"

Sasha swallowed. Her stomach dipped. "There's nothing to end," she whispered. "We knew this couldn't go anywhere when we started." She clutched the sheet hiding her quivering body. "We shouldn't have started."

Niko's jaw ticked. His gaze darkened, but he didn't say anything.

He has to know I'm right.

Niko got up from the bed and stalked out the cabin. Cool air blew inside when he opened the door. He stepped outside and the door slammed behind him. From the wind or his hand, she didn't know.

Sasha scrambled off the bed with the sheet wrapped around her. She headed to the bathroom to gather her supplies for the bath. With the door locked, she removed the

sheet and replaced it with the yellow towel she'd used before. She grabbed a wash cloth, together with her body wash, and stepped out of the bathroom cautiously.

She opened the door to the backyard. Light flooded the darkness. The heavy wind whipped her hair about and threatened to untuck the towel around her. Sasha climbed down the steps and walked to the tub sitting off to the side. It was filled.

Niko had prepared her bath. Was there nothing that man didn't do? Sasha smiled in spite of herself. She unhooked the towel, hung it on the rack. Even though the wind was heavy, the cool sensation of it against her naked skin made her shiver pleasantly.

Sasha placed the body wash on the ground beside the tub. The wash cloth she held on to as she stepped into the water. She moaned when she sank into the refreshing coolness.

God knows, she needed this. "Oh, this is the shit!"

She tried stretching out her legs and found she could. Her toes curled. One man was responsible for her feeling this good. She closed her eyes, threw her head back. The scent of pine and nature floated around her. Her occasional moan, the rustle of tree branches and a few crickets blended with the raging wind sound effects.

Sasha picked up the bottle of body wash and squeezed some onto the wash cloth. She put the bottle back down and proceeded to lather herself down. The rough material of the cloth grazed a sensitive nipple. Her eyes slid closed as her hand scrubbed down the front of her body.

"Hmm." Sasha dipped the cloth between her legs. It brushed against her clit. "Aww, shit!"

The door leading outside banged. Sasha jumped. The hand between her legs stilled. She opened one eye. Niko stood in the doorway, still clad in only his towel.

"I see you're enjoying your bath." Humor laced his

words.

"Why are you here?" She regarded him with both eyes open.

He moved away from the door and stepped outside fully. "It's time for my shower."

Sasha gulped. She'd assumed from what he wore, he'd already done that. "O-okay. I'll be finished in a few minutes."

"There's no need for you to leave." He walked to the shower, turned it on. "You do your thing and I'll do mine." He turned with his back to her and unhooked his towel.

Sasha flashed hot, then cold and hot again. Her breath left her body in a rush. He stood in all his bronze splendor. His taut ass and toned thighs begged for her caress. Her hands, hidden under the water, curled.

Head lowered, Niko stepped under the shower's spray. He braced one hand on the side of the cabin, the other on his hip. Sasha's eyes snapped shut against the image of him in the same pose, sliding in and out of her from the back.

Her pussy clenched. He'd gotten into her brain.

Sasha shook her head to clear it. She squeezed more soap onto the wash cloth and lifted her left leg out of the water. In the corner of her eye, Niko turned around. She licked her lips.

Full frontal.

Beyond caring, she dropped her abandoned leg back into the tub and watched him soap himself down. First his smooth chest. Then his torso and well-crafted six pack. Her gaze dropped before his hands did. His cock stood at half-mast. Under her hungry scrutiny, it swelled even more. Niko gave no indication he knew she watched. His attention remained on his task.

He palmed his cock and lathered it with the bar of soap. With one hand, he replaced the soap in its holder, with the

other, he stroked himself.

Painful desire sent spikes of heat to her pussy. Sasha bit her lip and shuddered. Niko worked his wrist over the head of his cock, then slid down to the base. He thrust his hips forward, surged into his palm. Sasha's hips mimicked his movements. A hand crept up from under the water and pinched a nipple.

She stifled a sob. How could he do this to her now, when she swore she'd never touch him again?

His wrist and hips sped up.

"No," she barely spoke, but it sounded like a shout to her ears.

Niko froze. His head shot up. She couldn't make out his expression, but tension rode his body hard. It was present in the lines of his body and the rigid set of his shoulders.

"Why?" The wind ripped his one-word question away.

Sasha licked her parched lips. The image he made standing there, dark against the light, water dripping off him, cock in his hand.

"Why, Sasha?" He turned off the shower by feeling his way and walked the few steps to where she lay creaming for him.

He stood over the tub. Her view from the bottom was of his heavy balls and his hand overflowing with stiff cock.

"I want you in my mouth," she said hoarsely.

"Louder," he growled. "Say it louder. There can be no mistakes with what you ask for tonight, Sasha. I want to give you what you want."

Bastard wanted her to beg! She came up on her knees in the water. Now, her face was level with his hip. Sasha tilted her head and stared into his eyes. They blazed a dark molten fire.

She circled his waist. Placed a kiss on his right hipbone. He took a breath.

"Damn you for this," she cursed against his hip.

"Damn you for making me need you." His fingers hooked in her hair and tugged. She leaned back, looked up into his fierce expression. "Tell me what you want, Sasha."

"You, fucking my mouth."

His fingers in her hair tightened painfully. "Yes." He flexed his hip. "Take what you want."

Sasha's heart pounded in her ears. She grabbed Niko's ass. He surged forward, his cock bobbed. She dropped kisses on both his hipbones. Her teeth sank into the flesh above his pelvic area.

Niko hissed.

Finally, she took his beautiful cock in her grasp. She circled him with her thumb and index finger, but they couldn't hold him. He was big and wide. Sasha rubbed her thumb across his slit weeping pre-cum. She smeared the slippery ooze all over his head.

Niko groaned.

She bent and flicked her tongue over the smooth head. A moan rumbled from her at the taste. Above her, Niko bit out a curse. His clean spring scent teased her nostrils whenever she inhaled. Sasha opened her mouth wide and his cock slid inside slowly. They both groaned. She sucked the round tip, used one hand to stroke his thick cock up and down. The heavy veins bulged. Sweet and salty pre-cum dissolved on her tongue.

Niko rotated his hips clockwise in slow motion. Sasha released his cock with a wet pop. She grasped his hardness, slippery with pre-cum and her saliva, with both hands and stroked him.

"Fuck!" He thrust forward.

She flattened her tongue and laved the pulsing length of him. Up and down she licked, reveling in his unique taste. Her grip on his cock tightened and Niko bucked into her

palm.

She smiled and took his cock into her mouth, loving the satin feel of him. Niko eased deeper with a curse. She relaxed her throat muscles. Sasha cupped his balls, scraped him with her nails, and he thrust roughly. His cock head bumped her tonsils. Her throat constricted around him as she gagged, her eyes watered. But he didn't retreat, she didn't want him to.

Fat drops of water splashed on her face and neck. At first she thought it came from Niko's wet skin, until the splashes turned to a torrent. The skies opened up on them. Heavy rain pelted her head and back. She released Niko's cock and turned her face up to the rain.

She brushed Niko's cock against her wet cheek and placed kisses on the purple tip. His fingers pulled at her hair.

"Babe."

She shook off his hand, tonight she'd get what she wanted. Sasha took his cock in her mouth again. Precum slid down her throat when she swallowed. She probed the slit in his cock with her tongue.

"Damn, Sasha!"

Sasha squeezed her eyes closed against the driving rain. She stiffened her tongue and traced the ridge on the underside of his mushroom tip. Niko bucked and growled. His thrusting hips picked up speed.

He tried to move away from her foraging tongue, but she tightened her hold on his cock. He swelled. More sweet and salt poured out of him. She moaned, savoring his taste.

She licked the ridge while one hand stroked him with bold moves. The other fondled his balls not so gently.

"Shit, shit!" Niko's fingers dug into her scalp. His hips moved faster and faster. "Damn it, Sasha, I'm coming."

She hollowed her cheeks, sucked his cock harder. The

fingers around him tightened, blunt nails scraped his ball sacs.

"Fuck!" Niko pistoned in and out of her mouth. She squeezed his balls. He shuddered and stiffened. Silky cream flooded her mouth.

She swallowed and licked him clean, slurping up every drop. Another thing to get addicted to, his come.

Niko eased his still hard cock out of her mouth, and Sasha laid her head against his flank. Her heated pussy contracted painfully. She needed to be filled. The rain and wind didn't stand a chance of putting out the fire raging in her womb.

She nuzzled Niko's hip and a tremor ran from him to her.

"Babe, let's go inside." Niko raised his voice against the howling wind.

Sasha tried to look up at him, but the rain flew into her eyes, blinding her. Head down, she held up her hands instead. Niko leaned down, grasped her underarms and lifted her. She didn't know his intent, but she knew hers. She locked her ankles around his waist. He staggered back. The movement caused her hungry pussy lips to brush his cock.

Sasha threw her head back and groaned. She grounded her hips against him. His breath stuttered, as did hers.

"Sasha, wait."

But she couldn't, the need overtook everything else. She whimpered and rotated her pussy on his smooth tip. His arms tightened around her. Sasha dug her fingers into his shoulder and lifted off.

"Babe, let's go —"

Sasha swallowed his words and slammed down on his cock. She bit his tongue as she screamed into his mouth. Sparks sizzled up and down her spine. The intense rush took her breath away. Her pussy clutched at his cock, contracted around him.

Niko tore his mouth away. "Fuck, babe, you're killing

me." Water ran down his face and dripped off his chin. He took tiny steps toward the door.

She bounced on his cock.

"Don't move, Sasha, please."

His pleading words didn't register. She had to move, had to get more. Niko climbed the steps. He held Sasha with one hand and opened the door with the other. Sasha took the opportunity to ride him. She tightened her pussy muscles and bucked wildly. Niko's hold loosened around her already slippery body.

"Damn it, I said don't move!"

She leaned in and took his lips. He entered the cabin backward with her humping him, trying to get even closer. Niko kicked the door closed and staggered the extra steps to the bed. Sasha flung her wet hair out of her eyes. His passion-darkened stare bore into her.

"Babe."

Sasha shook her head. "Make me come," she whispered. The dark embers in his eyes ignited anew.

He toppled backward on the bed. She landed on top, but his cock, so thick and hot, slid out of her. Sasha scrambled off Niko's lap in frustration. His cock rested on his stomach, slick with her cream. Leaning over, she licked off her cream.

Fuck. So good. Her eyes threatened to roll back in her head. She grabbed his cock and met Niko's gaze dead on. "Give it to me, Niko." Her thumb caressed him. "Please."

"It's yours, I'm yours." His throaty rasp wreaked havoc on her nerve endings.

Sasha moved away and stretched out on her stomach beside him. She brought her knees up, lifted her ass in the air. She wiggled in invitation.

Niko got his feet. "Ah, Sasha." He stroked her right ass cheek and dragged her toward him until her feet hung off the bed. His fingers dipped into her wet pussy.

Sasha hissed and rolled her hips. His fingers thrust in and out of her. She gripped the sheets, lifted her ass higher.

"God, yes. Fuck me." Niko's fingers disappeared. She peeked over her shoulder. His finger, wet with her pussy juices pushed into her ass. Her sphincter tensed against the red hot pain of the foreign invasion, something she'd never done before.

"Relax, babe. Let me in."

Sasha took a deep breath and relaxed as much as she could with a finger up her ass. She squeezed her eyes shut, pushed back as Niko pushed in. His finger entered her, all the way to his first knuckle, with a low pop. The muscles in her anus contracted, sending a shot of pleasure straight to her soaked pussy. His finger slid in to the second knuckle.

Sasha moaned.

Niko plunged two fingers in her pussy.

"Oh, fuck!" She buried her face in the mattress. The finger in her ass circled her prostate, those in her pussy scraped against her walls. Her hips rolled frantically, maddening pleasure spurred her own. Suddenly the fingers in her pussy disappeared.

"Fuck, Niko, please," she begged. Her pussy quivered in need. "Niko—"

He slammed into her so hard, her teeth ached. Sasha screamed. Niko pulled all the way out and slammed in again. He pounded against the entrance to her womb.

Sasha's eyes watered, her right leg shook uncontrollably, yet she begged. "More. God, more," she screamed. Nothing had ever felt this good. Behind her, Niko grunted. His hand on her hip would likely leave bruises, but she didn't give a fuck.

He pounded into her pussy, the finger in her ass thrust in and out. Their noises inside the cabin rivaled the wind and rain outside.

Niko slowed his tempo abruptly. Sasha pushed back, frantic, seeking the bliss he'd promised without words. He ground his pelvis against her ass. She arched forward—his cock nudged her G-spot. Liquid fire spread through her veins like a drug. Sasha rocked and rotated her hips faster. Niko followed her lead, his finger and hips sped up. He held on to her with one hand and slammed into her.

Sasha ignited with a bang. The force almost took her under. Her entire body buzzed and vibrated. She felt drunk. Her equally stuffed ass and pussy spasmed and contracted. Niko shouted her name and emptied his sperm in spurts in her pussy. Drums pounded in her chest, she couldn't catch her breath. Sweat mixed with the drying raindrops on her skin.

Niko covered her prone body with his. He'd removed his finger from her ass, but his cock remained buried in its new home.

"I never want to move."

Sasha chuckled. "I know what you mean." They laid silent for a while, listening to the storm outside.

"You thirsty?" Niko slid out of her and rolled to his side. Her pussy contracted, begged for his return. He stood.

"Yeah, water's fine." Sasha move to the center of the bed and fixed the pillows behind her head. She pulled the sheet to cover her legs.

Niko came back to bed carrying a glass of water for her and a beer for him. He handed her the glass and climbed up beside her.

Sasha gulped down the water in two seconds flat. Niko chuckled as he sipped his beer. She leaned her head on his shoulder and breathed in deeply. Shit with Vicente became complicated so fast, she barely had time to relax. She felt completely relaxed now, but hey, back to back orgasms will do that to a person.

Niko finished his beer and leaned over to place the empty bottle on the floor next to the bed. He turned and pulled her into his embrace. "Are you tired, do you want to go to sleep?"

She shook her head. "I'm good." She pressed her cheek against his hot chest. Things had certainly taken a turn. Not too long ago, she sat right here and vowed to never touch Niko again. Yet here she was, curled up at his side, needing to get closer.

Niko rested his head on the headboard. Sasha moved onto her stomach. She returned her head to his chest, curled a hand around his hip and threw a leg over his.

His fingers sifted through her hair. "Your hair's damp," he said. His words rumbled under her ear.

"It's fine," she murmured. "I'll get it fixed when I go home on Monday."

The lines in his body tensed at the reminder of her imminent departure. What did he hope would happen?

"Niko, I have to go back. Nothing's changed."

"Are you fucking kidding me, Sasha?" He cupped the back of her head. She looked up into his beautiful face filled with harsh lines. "Everything changed the minute you let me inside your body, the minute you screamed my name. Do you understand that?"

Sasha nodded and swallowed around the quarter-sized lump in her throat.

"Good, because no matter what happens on Monday, I'm not letting you go." He caressed her cheek.

Sasha bit the inside of her cheek to keep from screaming. Her fingers dug into her palm. She had to find a way to leave before Monday. She couldn't wait around for whatever he'd do when she tried to leave.

Niko cleared his throat. "Tell me about you and Terry Garraway."

CHAPTER 12

She couldn't have heard right. Did Niko just ask her to tell him about the man he killed? She eased out of his embrace, turned to face him. "You want to talk about Terry?"

He shrugged. "He's someone you cared deeply about. I'd like to know why."

"I can't." Sasha's gaze slid away from his probing eyes. If she told Niko about Terry, she'd be telling him her story as well. She bit her lip. She trusted him with the information, but she wasn't ready for him to know so much about her. Niko seemed intent on ferreting out all her secrets.

"Why not?" Niko draped the sheet over his legs and torso, covering up his luscious attributes.

"You know enough about me," she said. "There's nothing more you need. I should be questioning you. All I know about you is your name and the fact you killed Terry." Sasha lay on her back and stared up at the ceiling.

"You know more than that, babe. Besides, I wouldn't ask if I didn't want to know." He took the hand she held to her stomach and linked their fingers. "Tell me."

Sasha sighed. She kept her gaze on the ceiling and began. "At about three days old, I was abandoned on the steps of a church. I grew up in the foster care system. Each year a different home."

Niko's fingers tightened around hers. She refused to look

at him, didn't want to see pity in his eyes. She came to terms with her past, and her childhood, a longtime ago.

"When I turned fourteen, two things happened simultaneously. My body filled out and I was placed with a predator."

Sasha winced at the pressure from Niko's hold. He didn't say a word so she continued. "Three weeks after I arrived, Earl came into my room."

Niko inhaled sharply.

"He couldn't have known a six-inch Swiss blade had permanent residence under my pillow." She turned her head to look at Niko. His gaze simmered with anger on her behalf. "I kept very still as he crawled up my body. He whispered about all the things he'd do to make me a woman."

Sasha still remembered his stale cigarette breath, the spittle around his mouth. "He fumbled with the tie on my pajama bottoms and took his gaze off my face to focus on it. He never saw the blow coming. One minute his hands were on me and the next they were holding his guts as they spilled out."

"Wasn't anybody else in the house?" Niko growled. His eyes glinted dangerously.

"Wilma had already conked out from her nightly regimen of sleeping pills and Kingston was over at a friend's." She waited for him to make the connection. It didn't take long.

"Kingston as in King, your brother?"

"One and the same. I ran out the house and over to the neighbors. They comforted me until the cops came. King had been nice to me so I called him to let him know I'd carved his father up like a turkey."

"Wasn't he angry?" Niko slid his body down until they lay nose to nose. He stroked her jaw.

"I thought he'd be, but once I explained why, he seemed

to accept it. The courts didn't know what to do with me, it was my word against Earl's."

"That motherfucker didn't die?" Niko's outraged breath rustled her bangs.

"Three surgeries later, he lived to tell a different tale of a psychotic kid and a caring foster parent whose only crime was tucking her in at night."

"Bastard!" Niko spat. He kissed her temple. "Is he still alive? Do you want me to kill him for you?"

God, really? Could he be any sweeter?

Sasha smiled. "Yes, he's alive, but he's King's father. Because of that, he remains untouched."

"You love King very much."

"I do. The courts wanted to send me to yet another family, but King told them he wasn't letting me go alone. Anywhere they took me, he'd follow. In the end, the next door neighbors of his parents begged the court to allow us to remain with them. King's parents signed over their rights. We've been together ever since."

"The neighbors, are they the Hughes?"

Sasha nodded. "Yes. They moved us out of the neighborhood, sent us to private schools. I'd never felt so happy and loved. I belonged somewhere, with people who wanted me." Her eyes burned. Tears leaked out and ran across the pillow. Niko kissed them away.

"The Hughes didn't have children, so they poured all their love into me and King. We never wanted for what we needed most, which was love. They love—" Her voice cracked. "They loved us enough to wave goodbye when I turned eighteen and wanted to explore the world with King."

"They had faith in you." Niko nuzzle her neck. Sasha rubbed a hand up and down his tattooed arm.

"Their faith was misplaced. We ran out of money and

didn't want to crawl back to admit failure, so we picked pockets. That's how I met Terry."

"You picked Garraway's pocket?" Niko rose on his elbows to stare at her with an arched eyebrow.

"Yeah." Sasha chuckled. "He didn't notice until later. He retraced his steps until he found us at the mall. Then he told me he stood and watched. He approached us with an invitation to join his gang."

"You said yes..." Niko murmured.

"Nope. I didn't trust him, so I said we'll think about it. It wasn't like we could call somebody and ask for references. Kingston wanted to agree right away."

"You were the levelheaded one?" Disbelief colored Niko's voice.

"I've been known to be at a time or two." Sasha winked. "Terry came back to the mall the next day, and the next. Finally, I told him if he found us somewhere to live we'd do it."

"And so began your life of thievery."

"Yes. I don't regret a thing. We never hurt anyone, although we did carry weapons. When Terry died, I was voted new leader and I changed my last name to Forde. Until then, I was Sasha Hughes."

"Why did you change it?" Niko asked.

"I didn't want anything to connect the Hughes to me. It was cool when I was just a member, but as leader I have to deal with people face to face. I won't muddy their name."

"Where you and Garraway...did you..."

"What?" She narrowed her eyes.

Niko looked away, then back to her. "Were you lovers?"

He had to go there, didn't he?

"Does it matter?"

His grasp on her fingers tightened. "It matters a great deal. Answer the fucking question, Sasha." His jaw flexed.

Sasha rolled her eyes at his flare up. *You'd think he was my man or something.* "We were lovers, but not until years later."

"When he died?" His stare pinned her down.

She closed her eyes and swallowed a rush of emotion as she thought of Terry, his blood on her hands. "After much badgering on his part, I agreed to move in with him. When he died, we'd been living together for a few weeks."

* * * *

"I'm so sorry," Niko whispered the words around a throat clogged with guilt.

Sasha opened her eyes. Tears brimmed, but didn't spill over. Her lashes were clumped together and her almond gaze glittered like polished diamonds.

"He waited until I was ready," she whispered. "I knew from the very first day we met he wanted me. I kept pushing him away, telling him I wasn't ready. He waited until I turned twenty-one. He loved me and I've betrayed him over and over." The tears started a slow trek down her smooth cheeks.

Niko's heart constricted painfully. "How?" He forced the word out.

Sasha's gaze dropped to his lips, then came back to his eyes. "Whatever I had with him melted away like nothing when I laid eyes on you. You killed him, and yet, here I am." She waved a hand at the room. "I can't stop wanting you, needing you."

"Sasha..." Niko didn't know what to say to make it better, to minimize her pain.

She pulled away from his hold, covered her face with her hands. "You're like a drug," she whispered. "The more I get, the more I want."

"Tell me how to help and I will." Niko stroked her hair

and breathed in the scent of her skin. "Let me help you, Sasha."

Sasha dropped her hands and regarded him with suddenly dry eyes. "You're not good for me, Niko. We both know that, so I want you to let me go. When Monday morning rolls around, I'll walk out that door," she pointed to the cabin door, "and you won't stop me."

He couldn't do it. Niko shook his head. "You're asking the impossible."

"I'm asking you to let me be happy, let me go. Promise me you will." Her eyes pleaded with him.

"You'll be happy without me?" Niko's gut churned. His fists clenched against the urge to tie her to the bed. Anything to keep her near.

"I don't know, but I'm going to try my damndest." Sasha stroked his tattooed arm. "Do the same, Niko. You're so beautiful. You deserve someone who'll make you happy, too."

Niko grabbed the hand stroking him. "What if I've already found her? What do I do once she's gone?"

"You're strong, you'll carry on. We both will be fine, Niko." She leaned forward and kissed him, feather soft, on the lips. "Promise you'll let me go."

Niko grabbed her neck and pulled her closer. He thrust his tongue into the warmth of her mouth. Sasha moaned and matched his urgency. Her nails dug into his forearms. He sucked her tongue, she whimpered. They devoured each other until Niko tore away from her.

They stared at each other, chest heaving, breath ragged.

"I promise." The hardest thing he'd ever done. Niko didn't dare think forward to Monday morning.

Sasha's mouth trembled. "Thank you." She cleared her throat and brushed her pink bangs out of her eye. "Now, tell me about the tattoo."

Niko managed a smile at her command. "It's tribal." He held out his hand for her to inspect. She rose up on her knees and traced the swirling symbols with a finger.

Niko groaned and tilted his head back.

"It's like tiny black waves," she said.

He nodded.

"Where'd you get it done?"

"Malaysia."

Sasha gasped. "I'm sorry, I thought I heard you say Malaysia."

"You did." Niko chuckled at her shocked expression.

"You went to Malaysia to get tattooed?"

"The Borneo Headhunters," Niko told her. "They're the best."

"But...but...Malaysia?"

He linked their fingers and brought them to his lips. "I went there three years ago with my friends." When he got out of the coma. He'd needed a symbol that he'd been through hell and survived. "We all got inked."

"Your friends?" Sasha wrinkled her nose. "You mean Maysin and J?"

Niko laughed at the tone of her voice. "Yes, those are my friends."

"Hmm, I thought those two were hired hands." Sasha pushed his legs open and sat between them, her back to his chest.

Niko wrapped both arms around her and kissed the back of her neck. She shivered, melted against him.

"They're the only people I trust. Well, they were. Now I've added one more to that list." He nuzzled her where neck met shoulder.

"Hmm, flattery. I like it." She lifted a hand and grabbed hold of his head.

In the contented silence, Niko heard a thump against the

cabin door. He stiffened.

“What?” Sasha tensed as well.

“Ssh,” he whispered. “I think I heard something.” He eased away from her. Gaze on the door, Niko felt around for the sawed off shotgun he kept behind the bed head. His hand closed around smooth steel.

Sasha crawled off the bed and wrapped the sheet around her nude body. “Where’s my Glock?” She looked around.

“Oven.”

She tiptoed over to the kitchen. He approached the door on silent feet, shotgun at the ready. Behind him, Sasha checked her Glock’s clip. He sidled up to the door, pressed an ear to it. The wind and rain had long since died down, so he could make out the sounds.

Breathing and scraping.

He turned to Sasha. His lips twitched. She stood, legs apart, with two guns pointed in his direction—the Baby Glock and what looked like a .22 with pink grips. The latter probably came from the handbag he took from her car.

She raised an eyebrow.

He nodded at the unspoken question.

She widened her stance and nodded back.

The doorknob twisted.

Niko backed up and waited for the person dumb enough to fuck with him, and his Pink Lady, to enter.

CHAPTER 13

Sasha kept her eyes and guns trained on the door. Next to her, Niko stood stark naked, his sawed-off aimed dead center on the entrance to the cabin.

"Anything I should know before I start blasting?"

"Nope, can't think of a thing."

Bullshit, but she held her tongue and waited. His gaze never wavered from their target.

A dark head eased through the tiny crack in the doorway. The intruder kept his body hidden behind the door as he turned his head left, then right, and finally straight ahead.

"Oww, my eyes!" Their uninvited guest stumbled into the cabin with his gloved hand, gun in tow, covering his face.

"What's happening?" asked a deep voice from the outside.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Niko lowered his weapon and glared at the man who'd broken in.

A second man barged his way into the cabin, gun at the ready.

And then there were two.

Intruder number two took one look at Niko in his birthday suit and pivoted. "Put some clothes on, would you?"

"You know these fools?" Sasha edged closer to the newcomers as Niko grabbed a pair of jeans from the back of the couch.

"Uh...babe, this is Maysin." He pointed to the second man. "The one covering his face is Justice. Guys, I'm decent and this is Sasha."

Targets acquired.

Justice dropped his hands and regarded her closely. She felt like a bug under a microscope. Maysin turned around. His eyes were filled with questions, but he had to wait.

"Well. Well. Well," she drawled, "I've been waiting forever for you guys."

"Do we know you?" Maysin squinted down at her with olive green eyes. He resembled the basketball player Rick Fox with his toffee skin, the facial structure and his dark curly hair. But that's where the similarities ended. Maysin's hair was longer and secured at his nape in a ponytail. His jaw sported a scruffy five o'clock shadow. An angry-ass scar ran from behind his left ear to his chin, marring his otherwise pretty boy looks. His bulky frame, clothed in head to toe black, and deep baritone inspired Sasha's tighter grip on her guns.

"No, Rick, you don't know me." She grinned and released the safety on her pieces. "But I know you two."

Maysin frowned, probably at the name she called him. Behind her, Niko chuckled. Justice raised his gun.

"Ah. Ah." She tssked. "I'd rethink that if I were you. I'll drop you before you get one out."

"Who's this person?" Justice lowered his hand and turned to Niko.

"Didn't you hear him earlier? I'm Sasha. Now, drop the gun on the floor." She motioned to Maysin who stood coiled, ready to spring. "You, too."

Both men did as ordered in halting movements, their faces hard, eyes flashing retribution. When she was sure they were disarmed, Sasha curled her fingers around the trigger.

"Sasha." Niko called her name.

"What?" She didn't take her gaze off the men promising violence with their stare.

"Babe, you can't shoot them."

She frowned. "Why the hell not? They took something from me."

"Technically, I took it from you. Besides, you got it back."

"Oh, yeah, you're right."

The expression on Maysin and Justice's face said *What The Fuck?*

"But I still want to shoot them." She pouted.

"Why?" Niko stood beside her with his arms folded.

"I promised myself I would. It's been a long time since I've shot somebody." She made eye contact with the two men standing before her. "I'm due."

"Okay, am I the only one who thinks this chick's crazy?" Justice's white teeth flashed bright next to his dark-chocolate skin. Equally dark eyes, high cheekbones and a sharp jaw line gave him an exotic look. He towered over her, dressed in all black—shirt, motorcycle jacket, jeans and boots. His low voice had a Caribbean lilt to it.

"Sasha, you can't shoot them," Niko said. "They're my friends and I kinda like them."

"What does that have to do with anything? Maybe I should shoot you instead. You said I was the only other person who knew about this place, but clearly that's a lie." She glared at him from the corner of her eye.

"I didn't lie to you," Niko whispered against her neck. His breath on her skin made her shiver. "I have no idea how they found us."

"Why don't we find out?" She turned to Maysin. "How did you find us, Rick?"

His green eyes shot daggers at her. "My name is—"

Sasha sighed at his words spoken through clenched teeth.

"Really, Rick, we'll get nowhere if you insist on being bogged down with irrelevant details. Now, answer the question. Let's not forget the crazy chick has the guns."

"How'd you find me, Maysin?" Niko circled Sasha waist. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

"GPS on the phone," Maysin grated.

"Fucking technology," Niko murmured.

Sasha nodded in agreement.

"Alright, everyone take a seat," Niko said. He walked around to stand in front of her. "Sasha, put the guns down."

"What?" She glared at him.

"I know. You want to shoot somebody, but it can't be them." He framed her face with his hands and kissed her lips.

"Not even a flesh wound?"

"Nope."

She pursed her lips. "Well, can I at least smack them around a little?"

Niko barked a laugh. "No, babe. No violence of any kind."

Sasha lowered her guns with a sigh. Her arms were getting tired anyway.

Niko led the men to a seat on the couch. She followed with her guns at her sides. Maysin and Justice plopped onto the couch. Niko stood off to the side of the room, looking pensive.

"Sasha," Niko said.

"What?" She scrambled atop the bed and sat with her legs crossed.

"Put some clothes on."

"I'm dressed," she told him. Her attention got snagged by the scar on Maysin's face. It gaped white against his brown skin.

"You're draped in a sheet that can come loose at any

minute. If it does, I'll be really pissed off."

She ignored him.

"Stop staring at Maysin, and go put some clothes on," Niko said.

Her head snapped up. "I'm not staring at his scar. I've got one just like it." She got off the bed, made her way to the bathroom.

"Where do you have a scar?" he asked in confusion. "There isn't a scratch on your body."

"Oh, it's not on my body," she said over her shoulder. "It's in the glove compartment of my car." She closed the bathroom door on three shocked faces.

* * * *

"I said get laid," Justice told Niko. "Not shack up with Nutso over there."

"You weren't talking shit when she had the drop on you, now, where you?" Niko grinned at his friend.

Justice shrugged. "I know when to bite my tongue."

"She's the woman you had me find," Maysin said. "What's going on here?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." Niko paced and rubbed his head. He had business to discuss, but he couldn't, not with Sasha so close.

"Tell us already," Justice urged.

Niko stopped pacing and faced his friends. "She was at Harper's office that night. She saw everything."

"What? How?" Maysin asked.

Justice pulled his Bowie knife from his boot and stood up. "How do you want me to finish her?"

Niko pushed him in the shoulder. Justice fell back into the chair, a stunned look on his face.

Niko grabbed the shotgun, pointed it at his friends.

"Nothing happens to Sasha, do you understand? No one touches a pink hair on her head."

"Who the hell is she?" Justice demanded. "Are you in love with her?"

"She's the leader of the Shadow Gang," Niko muttered.

Silence met his words. They knew about his gunning down Terry Garraway under orders.

"No wonder she's crazy, she's a risk taker." Justice laughed. "I like it."

"Yeah, well, she's been hired to steal the evidence, too."

Both men sat up straight. "Who sent her?" Maysin asked.

Wait for it, wait for it. "Vicente." Niko told the men about Johan's blackmail over Sasha.

"Bastard."

"Evil son of a bitch."

Niko nodded at their correct sum-up of Vicente's morals. Each man had reasons for hating Johan Vicente. Those reasons bonded them and became their focal point for the past three years.

When Niko lay in his hospital bed, Maysin and Justice showed up. They were strangers to him. As he sat propped up on a mountain of pillows, overdosing on Jello, they told him why they'd come to him.

Justice talked about his dad, a lieutenant for Vicente, who'd wanted out after his wife became pregnant with their second child. Vicente had the entire Alexandre family gunned down in their home. Twelve-year-old Justice survived the bullet in his stomach and vowed to avenge his family. He learned all he could about the man who destroyed his life while hiring himself out as a killer. Maysin gave him his first contract job and became his best friend. One night he made his move, opening fire on Johan as he left a restaurant. Niko had been on the job by then and quickly neutralized Justice with a bullet to the ribs. Niko cursed

himself often for that. If only he'd known who he was protecting.

Maysin didn't have a personal tie to Vicente, but decided to help after he heard Justice's story. The product of a Brazilian father and white mother, he'd taken over his father's operation running a network of contract killers. Computer programming was his day job, although he didn't need the cash. The Winthrops—his mother's family—were loaded with old money.

In that hospital room, the three men made a pact to bring Johan Vicente to justice. Now, here they were.

"Sasha's the reason you want us wait, isn't it?" Justice fixed his dark gaze on Niko.

"I want to help, but I don't know how." Frustration bubbled up in Niko. "We can't move on him until we're sure there's no danger to her folks."

"What does she say about this?" Maysin asked him. "If she knows you were Vicente's clean-up guy, then she knows you're the reason she's in this position. Literally."

Because of Garraway.

"She knows I killed Garraway." Niko lowered his voice. "But she doesn't know I carried out Vicente's orders. She has no idea I'm connected to Vicente at all." A headache throbbed in the middle of his forehead. Under his friends' surprised looks, he rubbed it away.

"You're kidding!" Justice stood back up. "What does she know?"

"Nothing, except that I killed her lover."

"What a cluster fuck." Maysin groaned. "She'll kill you and come after us when she finds out."

"She won't find out." Niko's headache grew more pronounced.

"Don't bet on it," Maysin ground out. "She's a fucking psycho. Hot, but still bat shit crazy."

"How'd she even find you?" Justice asked.

"Cause she's good. Goddamn it," Niko cursed. "I've got to tell her." He thought of how the conversation would go, and grimaced.

"How long do you plan to stay up here?" Maysin leaned back on the couch and crossed his arms.

"I promised I'd let her leave on Monday." Niko squeezed his eyes shut at the reminder.

"So she's here against her will?" Justice asked.

"Does she look like she's here against her will?" Niko barked. Stupid fucking question.

"Well, you just said —"

"I know what I said. I took her, yes, but she could've left at any time. She chose to stay until Monday." He spun away. "I don't know if I can let her go."

"You'll have to when she finds out what you're hiding." Maysin regarded Niko with concern etched on his scarred face. No one, except Maysin, knew the story behind the scar. He refused to discuss it or why he never traveled to New York City.

The bathroom door opened. Sasha emerged in tight jeans and a black T-shirt with *Ripe For The Picking* written across her breasts in red.

She padded to the bed on bare feet. "Don't stop on my account, boys. It's just lil ole me, sitting here, nice and quiet."

The hairs on the back of Niko's neck stood up.

CHAPTER 14

Niko knew Vicente this whole time! He'd played her. Sasha schooled her features into a semblance of a smile. She faced the men on the couch with her back against the pillows. They all stared at her like they expected her to sprout wings any second. If she could, she'd fly the fuck away from this place and Niko.

Deep breaths. He couldn't know she overheard him. She'd told him about the blackmail, about the threat to the Hughes and he sat there and didn't say a thing. He told her about Terry, but neglected to mention who signed off on it. He worked for Vicente. Had he already known about the threats to her family, her friends? Why did he even want the flash drive?

I have something for his ass. She'd make him regret ever fucking with Sasha Forde.

"So, gentlemen, bring me up to speed." She crossed her legs and gifted each one a toothy smile. "What are we discussing?"

"Ah..." Niko cleared his throat. "I was telling them about how we met."

"Oh, yes, a fave of mine as well." She grinned until her cheek muscles ached. "Did he tell you I woke him with my trusty Baby Glock?"

"No, he didn't." Justice chuckled. "I'd love to have seen that."

Sasha waved his comment away. "Oh, it was nothing really. It's what I do."

"You run the Shadow." Maysin turned his way-too-serious greens on her.

"Told you that, too, huh?" She crossed her eyes at Niko. The motherfucker was putting her business in the streets. "I took over after my fiancé was murdered."

Crickets chirped in the stillness of the room. Niko narrowed his eyes and fisted the hands at his sides. Maysin and Justice looked from Niko, to Sasha, and back.

"You were engaged?" Maysin's deep voice echoed.

"Indeed I was, Rick." She ignored the storm gathering in Niko's expression. "I loved Terry. I couldn't wait to be his wife."

"Sasha—" Niko's voice shook. He took a step in her direction.

She turned her attention to Justice. "Tell me about you, Justice. Do you have the same job as Niko, killing unsuspecting loved ones?"

"Um. I, ah..." Justice glanced up at Niko standing rigid beside the bed. "I dabble in this and that."

"I see." Sasha moved down the bed until she sat facing Maysin. "What about you, Rick? Are you going to feed me the same bullshit as these two or give it to me straight?" She laid her chin in her right palm and waited.

Maysin's grin softened his eyes and made him even more gorgeous. "I run a network of contract killers."

Sasha blinked. *Did not see that one coming.* "Of course you do, Rick. Thanks for the honesty, it's been lacking lately." She stood and headed back to the bathroom. Niko tried to grab her elbow, but she sidestepped his touch.

"You're in a shitload of trouble," Justice whispered.

Sasha locked the bathroom door behind her and leaned against it. She couldn't hold it in and now she'd given

herself away.

Damn it! She walked over to the toilet and lifted the lid off the tank. Her BlackBerry sat at the bottom, inside a Ziploc bag. After fishing it out, she turned on the faucet. She powered up the phone and waited for the beep indicating she was good to go. Accessing the GPS, she memorized her current coordinates and composed a text to Kingston with the info on her location, and a brief message—*meet here tomorrow @ 2200hrs*.

She hit send, and her knees crumbled. Her body sank to the floor as tears ran down her cheek. The ache in her chest spread through her entire body in seconds. She'd wanted to know about Niko, so she eavesdropped on his conversation with his friends. Sasha wished she hadn't. She'd have walked away not knowing the man she'd come to need more than air had boldly lied to her face, over and over. In the end, she'd have walked away not knowing him at all.

A loud bang on the bathroom door made her jump. The phone fell out of her hands and clattered to the floor.

"Sasha," Niko called from the other side.

Sasha grabbed the phone with trembling fingers and placed it back into the bag. She held on to the edge of the sink and pulled herself up off the floor. Back on her feet, she dropped the phone into the tank and covered it up.

"Sasha, open the door." Niko resumed his banging.

She splashed water on her face and dried it with a towel. A couple gulps of air and she opened the door. She ducked under Niko's arm and walked out.

"Gentlemen, I'm sorry to be a party pooper." She stood in front of Maysin and Justice, who still reclined on the couch. "I'd say I'll make it up to you, but I don't want to."

"Oh, that's quite alright," Justice said, "we understand completely."

"See that you do, I'm off to bed." She headed to the bed,

but turned back. "BTW, Rick, you don't happen to have a business card, do you? I've a feeling I might need your services real soon." She purred the last bit.

"Tread carefully, Sasha," Niko growled.

She bit back the scathing retort on the top of her tongue and elected to ignore him instead.

"I don't have a card, but I could write down my number," Maysin said.

Sasha made show of looking around the cabin. "Well, ask the man of the house if he has any paper and pens in his car." She climbed up the bed and pulled the covers over her. "Also, this *is* my bedroom so..."

The men stood up from the couch.

Justice stretched. "Well, I'd best be hitting the ole dusty trail."

Sasha grinned. She could easily get to like those two guys.

Niko threw his car keys to Maysin. "Take this, I'll be right out."

"It was a revelation to meet you, Sasha," Maysin said. "I hope we see each other again."

"Ditto." She smiled, a genuine one, at him. "Stay cute." She winked.

Justice waved a gloved hand. "Don't be too hard on Niko, okay?"

"You don't need to plead my case for me, J."

"Yes, J, no need. I'm sure one of these days he'll come around to doing it himself," Sasha snickered and waved back at Justice.

The two men exited the cabin and closed the door behind them. Sasha stared up at the ceiling, she couldn't bear to look at Niko or else she'd break down.

"You should go say goodbye to your friends," she whispered.

"Sasha, let me explain," he said thickly.

Sasha's heart beat a furious rhythm against her ribcage. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Here's the thing, Niko. You've had all this time to explain, yet you didn't. It speaks louder than you ever could right now, so go say goodbye to Maysin and Justice." She turned on her side with her back to him. "Make sure you get the number from Maysin."

* * * *

Niko stared at Sasha's back, torn between going outside to join his friends and staying until she forgave him. In the end, he sighed and walked to the door—she'd be there when he got back.

Outside, Maysin and Justice stood next to his SUV. They turned when he slammed the cabin door shut. Mechanically, he climbed down the stairs to join them.

"You okay, man?" Concern brimmed in Justice's eyes.

"Yeah, yeah." Niko slapped him on the back. "I knew this would happen sooner or later."

"But you'd have preferred later," Maysin said in his matter-of-fact way.

"Yes." Niko nodded. He'd have preferred for Sasha to never find out. He didn't want to see the look he saw on her face tonight. She'd been crying in the bathroom—her red rimmed eyes gave her away. His gut churned with guilt. The blow she dropped about her and Garraway hit its mark. He couldn't breathe.

"Give this to Sasha." Maysin handed him a slip of paper.

Niko's fingers curled around it. *Why does she need Maysin's number?*

"Where are you parked?" He didn't see another vehicle anywhere around.

"Back down that way." Justice pointed down the narrow trail. "We didn't know what we were headed into, so we had

to be cautious."

"I still can't believe you guys drove up here," Niko said.

"You acted strange over the phone and now we know why," Maysin said. "You've found yourself a crazy woman."

"Yeah, and she's fighting you tooth and nail," Justice piped up.

"She is, but I wouldn't have it any other way," Niko admitted. Sasha had to see how good they were together, she had to.

"Alright, let's head out." Maysin grabbed Niko in a bear hug. "Tell her how you feel, you never know."

"I'll think about it," Niko said when Maysin released him.

Justice patted him on the back. "I say run far away, she's liable to cut your balls off in your sleep."

Niko laughed as they walked away.

"You'll be back Monday, right?" Justice yelled over his shoulder.

Niko answered back in the affirmative.

He waited until they disappeared from sight, then headed inside. On the threshold, he hesitated. What could he tell Sasha to make her understand his position?

The truth.

He stepped into the cabin and closed the door. Soft snores filled the room. She slept. Niko secured the door and kicked off his jeans. He turned out the light and climbed onto the bed naked.

"Sasha?" He leaned over to touch her shoulder. The mattress dipped under his weight. Muted snores greeted his query. Niko grunted. He lay on his back, flung an arm over his eyes. He still had time. He had a day and a night to convince her to acknowledge their feelings for each other. She couldn't walk away from the fire raging between them.

It shouldn't matter that she'd been engaged to Garraway.

He's dead. Sasha herself realized what Niko gave her was stronger, hotter. She couldn't walk away.

Niko turned and curved his body around Sasha's. Her warmth soaked through to his bones. He nuzzled the back of her neck, inhaled her scent, a mixture of her and him. Wrapping a hand around her waist, he pulled her back against his chest. This is where she belonged, where they both belonged.

Niko's eyes drifted closed. He'd remind her, tomorrow.

CHAPTER 15

The next morning, Sasha crawled out from under Niko's arm and ran to the bathroom. She needed to pee with an urgency, plus she wanted to check her phone to see if King responded to her message.

In the bathroom, she locked the door and sat on the toilet seat. Twisting her body around, she lifted the lid off the tank. Sasha freed the phone from its watery prison and powered it up. She stifled a yawn with the back of her hand as she waited. The whole of last night was spent faking, faking sleep, faking snores, faking her reaction to Niko's nearness.

Sasha shook her head. She wasn't built for this shit—faking took up too much time. The phone beeped and she rushed to flush the toilet. The screen flashed. *One missed text message.*

She checked the sender. Yep, from Kingston. The message contained only a yellow smiley-face emoticon, their sign. Kingston would be there tonight to get her.

Her knees trembled. How would she pull it off with Niko not knowing? She stood, stared at her image in the mirror as she brushed her teeth. They only had a few hours together, after which she'd never see him again. She didn't want to spend those last hours arguing. Like it or not, her body craved his. She cared about him way more than she should.

She spit into the sink and rinsed her mouth. Today would

be her day, her show. Everything would go according to her say so. Sasha grinned and wiped her face on a towel. She finger combed the pink hued mop on her head and headed to the kitchen.

Time for breakfast.

She sat outside on the porch steps. Grace Potter and The Nocturnals crooned *Apologies* through her iPod headphones. The chilly morning air woke her body up better than her usual caffeine drip. Pine and rain scented the air. Dew wet leaves littered the porch and yard. The steps were still a bit moist from last night's rainfall, but Sasha didn't notice. She stared out over the multi-colored landscape. The rising sun captivated her. It was like looking into a blinding, orange mirage.

She sighed and sipped her chocolate milk. Breakfast consisted of Saltines smeared with PB and J, sausage and eggs scrambled and chocolate milk because *someone* doesn't like coffee. Whoever heard of such a thing?

Surprisingly, Niko slept through her activities in the kitchen. Not that she intentionally made a racket, but for a killer he really was lax with his safety. Anything could happen at any time, as evidenced by their late night visitors.

The coldness of the porch invaded Sasha's bare feet. She curled her toes and instantly thought of Niko's mouth on them. Shivers danced the length of her spine. She'd never be able to do anything again without thinking of him. Future men would unfortunately be compared to him. Even now, she compared past men—specifically Terry—to him. It wasn't fair.

Terry had loved her. He didn't hesitate to let her know how he felt. In spite of his profession, or maybe because of it, he remained kindhearted and serene. Not once did he raise his voice or push her beyond her boundaries. He never

made her cry, beg or plead. Sasha thought he was the best thing to happen to her, until he asked her to marry him. Then she had to admit to herself something was missing from the list of Terry's many attributes.

Fire.

Heat.

The blazing, scorching, out of control ferocity she needed. Craved. Discovered in the man asleep inside the cabin. That's why she'd told Terry no. He'd stormed out the house, confusion and anger blazing his usually loving gaze. Half an hour later, she got the call.

Sasha stared down at her hands as Duffy purred *Syrup and Honey*. Bright red blood had soaked into the gray vintage suit she'd stolen for him from a Diplomat's home in Geneva. No matter how hard she scrubbed, she couldn't get the blood out. In the end, she threw it away.

Men came into her life after that, but by her choice they never lasted. She had a jump-off for those specific nights when JD and her fingers weren't enough. Miles came when she called and left when she came. They had an understanding. For almost a year, Sasha only slept with Miles. Until the day she saw Niko, she'd refused to think she needed more.

Sasha took a deep breath and sang along to Kings of Leon's *Use Somebody*. She tapped a foot and rocked side to side. A featherlight touch on the back of her neck caused her to leap almost out of her skin.

She yanked out the ear buds and turned to scowl at a half-naked Niko. "'Are you trying to give me a heart attack?'"

He held up his hands in surrender. "I called your name, but you didn't hear me."

"So you decided to kill me instead?" She shook her head and put her ear buds back in. Two seconds after she turned her back on him, he tapped her on the shoulder. Sasha

removed the ear buds and turned off the iPod. She rose and went to stand beside him.

"Is there something I can help you with, Niko? You know, other than absolution?" Staring into his sleep clouded eyes with a hand on her hip, she steeled herself against letting her hungry gaze travel below his neck.

His lips curved up at the corners. "Thanks for the breakfast."

She shrugged. "I see no reason not to feed you. Sure, you're a lying fuck, but I'll deal with that later."

The smile disappeared from his face. "I never lied to you, Sasha. Not once."

No, he didn't just say that! She walked past him to the door. "Let that technicality warm your bed because I won't be doing those duties after tonight."

"Hey." Niko grabbed her elbow, forced her around to face him. "No matter the walls you put up, you can't deny us," he said fiercely. "You can't ignore what we have."

Sasha wrenched her hand away. "I can ignore whatever the fuck I choose." How dare he tell her what she can't do? "My body might crave yours, but I don't trust you. When I walk out of here, I'm never looking back."

He recoiled as if she'd slapped him. Sasha ignored his sharp intake of breath and stepped into the cabin. She needed a shower, preferably ice cold.

Sasha emerged from her shower refreshed and energized. She sat on the bed and applied lotion to her skin, while Niko did some type of karate shit on the porch. She watched him through the open doorway. He moved like water, smooth and fluid. His muscles bunched and rippled when he kicked or punched his invisible opponent. The grunts coming from him reminded Sasha of the sounds he made when she had her mouth on his cock.

Her arousal scented the room. Fuck! How could he have such an effect on her? Sasha felt like shooting him just for that. She hurried to pull on a pair of jeans over the pink lace thong before he turned around. The slate gray jeans were paired with a pink tank. *Cute and Cuddly* scrawled across her chests in black letters. A quick search through her purse produced her MAC Lipglass and compact. She applied the *tri-color* lip glass, combed her hair. Now she felt passable.

Sasha straightened up the bed and went to retrieve her BlackBerry from the bathroom. She wanted to send a check-up email to Pat and Clay. As the phone powered up, she walked out the bathroom and into the smooth, sweaty wall of Niko's chest.

"Oomf." She grabbed his hip to keep her balance. Her nails dug into his skin. Niko hissed and sunk his fingers into her hair.

He tugged her head back. She blinked up into his grim expression.

"You should always look where you're going."

She opened her mouth in a show of false bravado to curse him, but didn't get a chance. He pushed her up against the wall next to the bathroom door. Her head banged, neither noticed.

Nervous, she licked her dry lips. "Niko —"

He swooped down and captured her mouth. Sasha didn't hesitate, she opened for him. His delicious tongue swept inside and she latched on. She sucked him in ravenously. Her nails raked his back. He groaned in to her mouth. His hold on her hair tightened, her scalp tingled and Sasha moaned. Her left leg traveled up Niko's leg to wrap around his waist. He humped her and she rode him right back. His cock strained against her jean-covered crotch.

Niko's hand abandoned her hair to grab her ass. He pulled her tighter to him and deepened the kiss. God, this

was what she craved so much. She'd never have it again after tonight. A sob caught in Sasha's throat. She squeezed her eyes shut, gave herself over to the feeling.

Niko broke the kiss. He kissed her cheek, eyelids and neck. She shivered and clutched at his head.

"You're mine," he rasped in her ear. "Just like I'm yours."

She stiffened. The phone in her hand began playing Beyonce's *Diva*. Incoming call.

Niko dropped a kiss on her lips. "Answer the phone, Sasha."

She didn't glance at the name display, Niko's eyes held her in its dark snare. Like a robot, she hit Talk and put the phone to her ear.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's me. I'm back," Miles greeted her.

Geez, really? Now? "Uh...I didn't know you'd left." Sasha covered the mouth piece with her palm and spun around.

"Yeah, I spent a few days down south. I just got in."

"Okay, uh...Miles, can I call you later? I'm busy right now."

"Sure. Do you want me to come over?"

Sasha cringed at the hopeful note in his voice. "No, I'm not home. I'll be back on Monday, we'll see then." She hung up on whatever Miles was about to say next.

Niko yanked on her hair. She pivoted.

"Jesus, Niko!"

"Who's Miles?" His eyes glinted with a dangerous light.

Her mouth opened, closed. "Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to."

He grabbed her by the neck. Sasha didn't move. She stared into his eyes. Niko was angry, but he'd never hurt her.

"Don't make me ask again, Sasha."

Fuck! "Miles is a friend who...ah, um. Miles is my jump-

off."

Niko released her and walked away.

Sasha slid down the wall, eyes closed. Could this shit happen at a worse time? What the fuck was Miles doing calling her? *Probably returning your call.* She bit her lip and groaned out loud. The night she'd called him when she'd really wanted Niko.

What. A. Mess.

How to clean it up? She got to her feet and went in search of Niko.

She found him on the porch, staring off in the distance. The rugged lines of his face appeared more pronounced. Corded muscle bulged on the arms folded across his chest. His army-green sweats dragged low on his hips.

Sasha stood next to Niko and mimicked his stance.

"Did you call him?" Though his tone was low, Niko addressed her though gritted teeth. He refused to look at her.

Tread carefully, ole girl. Sasha swallowed, more nervous than she'd ever been. "I didn't call Miles today." *Notice I didn't say yes or no. Technicality was Mother.*

"Don't say his name." He dropped his hands to grip the porch railing. His knuckles whitened.

Sasha pressed her lips together, waited for whatever came next. Isn't it funny how one minute she's mad at him and in a blink the tables turned?

"Do you hate me that much, Sasha?"

Startled, Sasha looked up at him. His eyes were closed, his jaw ticked.

"What? Where did that come from?" She grabbed his forearm closest to her. "I don't hate you, Niko."

He turned and regarded her steadily. "Of course you do. You hate the man who took your fiancé from you. The one you loved so much." He spat the words as if they tasted foul.

Tears brimmed Sasha's eyes. She shook her head, held out a hand for him to stop.

"If it weren't for me, you'd be married by now, right? Churning out little thieving babies?"

She slapped him across the face. "Shut up, you bastard!" Her chest heaved. Tears slid down her cheeks.

Niko flexed his jaw. "You don't get another shot, Sasha."

"Fuck you. Next time it'll be bullets, motherfucker." Sasha turned away from Niko, headed down the stairs. She didn't know where she was going, but she had to leave before she fucked his ass up.

"I lost someone, too."

The soft spoken words stopped her on the second stair. She spun slowly in her toes.

"Who?"

"Someone I loved very much." Pain darkened his gaze to burnt amber.

"I really don't think I should know about the woman you loved and lost." Sasha curled her hand into a fist. The woman he loved, who wasn't her. Her chest ached.

"The point is, I know the pain of losing someone you care about, Sasha. It doesn't mean you stop living your life." Niko took a step toward her.

"Was she killed? Did someone you know intimately kill her under orders?" Sasha put a hand on his chest, above his heart, to stop him from getting closer. The smooth muscle flexed under her palm. Salty sweat and Niko's delicious musk teased her nostrils.

She held her breath.

Although his eyes flickered, Niko shook his head at her questions. "No. Elina's alive."

"Then you don't know how I feel. Please, don't compare us." His heart drummed a loud rhythm under her touch.

Niko grabbed the wrist of the hand on his chest. "When

were you going to tell me you and Garraway were engaged?" His features tightened into harsh lines. His close stare narrowed to sharp flints.

"When were you going to tell me Vicente hired you to kill him? And why are you even here? Did Vicente send you after me?" Sasha shot back. She tugged at his hold. His fingers tightened. Her pulse hummed, blood slowed to a crawl through her veins.

"No. I haven't worked for Vicente for three years. Besides, it didn't matter." Tension rippled off his body in waves. "In this cabin it's all about us. Right now I want to know why you held back that bit of information." His eyes bored into her.

Sasha looked away. She fought back the urge to scream. Nobody, not even Kingston, knew about Terry's proposal.

"The day you killed him, he asked me to marry him." She refused to look at Niko.

"What was your answer?" Niko's bruising hold on Sasha's wrist belied his icy calm words.

Sasha's eyes closed. Guilt, tamped down for so long, rose up and choked her. Her mouth trembled. "No," she whispered. "My answer was no."

He dropped her hand. "No?"

She spun away from him. "I couldn't say yes." Sasha covered her face with shaking hands. The only one who knew her answer was the person who killed Terry. The ultimate betrayal. But she couldn't marry Terry, he loved her with a gentleness she appreciated and counted on to hide from herself and what she really needed. It wasn't him.

Scalding tears ran down her cheek. Sasha bit her bottom lip until copper melted on her tongue. In the strange stillness of their exposed environment, she felt Niko's heat at her back. She stiffened, braced for the sensory overload his touch heralded.

"Why couldn't you say yes?" Their skin never came in contact, yet his voice and breath on her nape made her feel lightheaded.

Sasha wanted nothing more than to lean back, put her head on his shoulder and allow his strong arms to pull her close. It could happen, Niko made it clear what he wanted. But he didn't have to live with the fact he'd be sleeping with the enemy.

She sniffed. "He couldn't give me what I needed," she whispered. It was the wrong thing to say. The truth, but still wrong.

"What did you need?"

And that was why. Niko wouldn't leave her be, he wanted to know it all. Sasha struggled to keep some things hidden from his searing view. "I don't know what I needed."

She didn't, not until she met Niko. Not until she'd touched him, kissed him.

"That's a fucking lie. You know what you need, you've always known. You only refuse to acknowledge it."

Sasha tried to tune out his words. She dropped her hands, stared up at the clear blue sky. The air had grown humid the further the sun rose. No birds chirped, tree branches barely rustled. It was as if they all quieted down to listen in on the conversation.

She wiped her eyes, turned to meet Niko's hard stare. Sasha touched his jaw in a brief caress. "Then we're both liars." She brushed past him and into the cabin.

CHAPTER 16

Niko remained locked in the same spot after Sasha left. What she and Garraway had didn't compare. She knew it, which explained her need to push him away.

Niko shook his head. He wasn't going anywhere, not if he could help it. He had to find a way for Sasha to see how good they could be together. The guilt she felt for being with him had to go. It only worked to deprive them of what they both wanted.

One night. They had one more night together, then he got to watch her walk away.

Not for long, Niko vowed. It'd be hard, but he'd find a way to keep Sasha in his life.

He sat on the steps and rested his elbows on his thighs. He'd never had to fight so hard to get a woman, or to keep one. Elina was a portrait in fragility. Huge dark eyes in a pixie face. He always worried she'd crack if he held her too tight or loved her too hard. When she told him she carried his baby, Niko feared her slight build wouldn't be up to carrying their child to term.

He needn't have worried.

Niko wanted Sasha. No one else mattered. He'd put Elina where she belonged a long time ago—his past. He considered his vendetta against Vicente a separate entity, having nothing to do with Elina and everything to do with Johan himself. That remained his present, intertwined with

Sasha's in more ways than one.

He got to his feet and dusted off the seat of his pants. He'd head to the pond for a swim and brainstorm ways to keep Sasha by his side. Because her being anywhere else was unacceptable.

* * * *

Harper Royce stared at the diamond on her ring finger, then at the man asleep in the plane seat next to her. Drool escaped Isaiah Merzier's parted lips and soaked into the blue pillow pressed between his head and the window. The window to the seat she gave up because Isaiah had to have it. Every time the flight attendant's cart bumped her knee, she gritted her teeth and reminded herself he was her fiancé. The dime-sized diamond helped ease her pain, but not by much.

She gazed down at the ring again, wiggled her fingers. The flawless princess cut sparkled when it caught the light.

Harper couldn't feel happy. Her life wasn't headed in the direction she'd planned. Nothing was. She felt alone and adrift, a spectator on the sidelines, watching as someone else lived her life. Everything was faked, a show put on for the benefit of others to keep her practice, her passion, from sinking fast. Isaiah had her exactly where he wanted her. She couldn't out-manuever him until she put Johan Vicente behind bars.

She'd kept her evidence gathering to herself, on the off chance Vicente would find out and try something nasty. In the end, he found out anyway. She had no idea how. But no amount of harassing phone calls and cryptic notes left in her mailbox and on her car would deter her from the course she'd set. Her freedom depended on it.

Isaiah grunted and shifted his weight. His left elbow poked her in the rib. Harper sucked in a breath, then let it

out slowly. *Happy thoughts, Harper. Think happy thoughts.*

This trip to the Bahamas had been Isaiah's idea. He thought he'd surprised her with the tickets, but really he should've known better. She'd already snooped, looking for anything to use against him. Men—especially Isaiah—liked to think they were in charge. It'd be cruel to disabuse them of the notion.

She hadn't figured on the ring, but she didn't doubt its arrival. That's what Isaiah's blackmail was about. Her as his wife and mother to his children. A shudder rippled through her. She still had no idea why he set his sights on her—there wasn't anything special about her. Unless you count the information he'd obtained God-knows-how.

She tossed her hair over her left shoulder and tried to cross her legs. No luck. Her five-foot-eleven frame didn't help the situation any. Harper tried rubbing out the kinks in her neck instead. She couldn't wait to take a long soak in her own bathtub. While she'd enjoyed the sun and sand of the Bahamas, she itched to get home. She wanted to go over her documents one last time.

Isaiah mumbled in his sleep. Harper leaned back in her chair and sighed. The ring glinted where her hand rested in her lap. She wanted her life back.

* * * *

Maysin rolled over onto his back. A heated touch on his stomach spread fire to his aching cock. He growled low in his throat and arched into the fingers teasing his balls. He squeezed his eyes tight and pictured his torturer. Smooth mahogany skin glowing with her desire. A flushed oval face and serious-turned-passion-drunk chocolate brown eyes. Perfect bow lips for sucking his cock. Wide hips and a round ass to sink his fingers into. Endless legs made to wrap

around him.

Wet lips and an expert tongue slid over and around his straining cock. Maysin bucked and hissed a curse. His tormentor chuckled, sucked him deep into her throat. Behind closed eyelids, those serious browns twinkled for him only. He reached down with one hand and grabbed her hair. Silky strands wrapped around his fingers. He anchored himself and thrust up into her mouth.

She gagged. Nails sank into his thighs. Maysin didn't ease the pressure, she liked his rough play. He used his hold on her hair to bob her head up and down on his cock. Pre-cum eased out of his slit. She licked it all up with a low moan. Her heady arousal scented the air. Maysin licked his lips. He couldn't wait to bury his face in her wet cunt.

His torturer dug her fingers into his hip, tightened her lips around the head of his cock. He lifted his hips off the bed. She sucked the very tip of him with concentrated pressure. His toes curled. Moans filled the room, his and hers. Her nimble tongue swiped across his oozing slit. He jerked once. Her fingers cupped his balls and squeezed.

"Shit." Maysin's hips pistoned into her mouth. His tormentor tightened her grip on his cock and Maysin couldn't hold back. He thrust into her mouth, sensitive cock grazing teeth. The spike of painful pleasure sent him over the edge.

With a roar, he shot his come down her throat, named the face swimming around in brains turned to mush. "Fuck, Harper!"

Maysin's chest heaved as he fought to catch his breath. He wiped a hand across his sweaty brow. The source of his morning blow job crawled up his body. Her sweaty skin stuck to his as she settled on his chest.

He opened his eyes. The redhead wrinkled her freckled nose at him. Hurt burned in her eyes.

Damn, what have I done now?

"Who's Harper?"

Maysin froze. "Krista, I—uh. It's not, I'm not—"

"Is it a man? Are you gay?" Krista sat up. Brilliant green eyes narrowed at him.

Maysin chuckled. If only shit was that easy. He shook his head. "No, Harper's a woman." A woman involved with someone else and way out of his league. She didn't even know he existed, yet here he was destroying a good thing with Krista. And for what?

"Are you in love with her?" Krista tucked her feet up under her body. She was way too calm for someone who'd been called another woman's name during sex.

"I'm not entirely sure what I feel." He shrugged apologetically. Krista's eyes filled with tears.

She scrambled off the bed, taking the blanket with her. "When you know, give me a call. Maybe I'll be waiting, maybe I won't be." She wrapped the blanket around her naked body and marched into the bathroom.

"Fuck!" Maysin flopped back onto the mattress. He couldn't explain the effect Harper Royce had on him. He'd seen her on the cameras they'd installed in her house and once or twice on the street from a distance, yet she swam through his blood like a slow moving drug.

He couldn't flush her out. Maysin wasn't altogether sure he wanted her gone.

CHAPTER 17

Sasha scraped the bottom of the ice cream container with a groan. All done so soon. She polished the spoon with her tongue, looked around for something else to munch on. What, or rather who, she wanted to lick had disappeared with a mumbled something about the pond. That had been two hours ago. Since his abandonment, she'd listened to her iPod, munched on some trail mix flung into the far side of a cupboard and had the ice cream.

Now she was ready for lunch.

She hopped off the bed and walked to the kitchen area on bare feet. The hem of her jeans dragged on the wood floor. In the kitchen, she rifled through almost empty cupboards. Good thing she made plans to leave tonight, else she'd starve up in this bitch. She wasn't a fan of hunger.

A couple cans of tuna turned up, so she decided to make sandwiches. That took care of the lunch. On to dinner. Sasha discovered a box of soup mix in another dark spot in the cupboards and shrugged.

Soup it is.

She turned on the oven, placed the bread inside to toast. She went to work opening the cans. *With a motherfucking knife!*

The cabin door banged open as she started on the second can. She jumped. The knife skated against the round can and sliced her left palm.

"Ow. Damn it!" Blood welled up from the deep cut. Sasha

hurriedly placed her hand in the sink and opened the cold water on it.

The man of the hour appeared at her side. "Are you okay?" He grabbed her wrist. "Here, let me see."

Sasha snatched her hand away. "There's nothing to see." A sharp prick of pain made her press her lips together.

"Damn it, Sasha." Niko grabbed his wife beater off the couch and tore it into little pieces. Her eyes feasted on his muscles as they bunched and contracted.

"Give me your hand, Sasha." He held out his hand and she placed hers in it. With the utmost care and patience, Niko bandaged her palm. But there wasn't anything to hold the cloth.

"There should be some safety pins in the bathroom," he said. He kept a hold on her hand and led her to the bathroom.

In the suddenly too-small space of the bathroom, Sasha gritted her teeth against the pulsing pain in her palm while Niko hunted down a safety pin. Standing next to him, she inhaled the scent of fresh water and his skin whenever she breathed in.

She closed her eyes.

"Got it."

Sasha opened her eyes as Niko secured the cloth. His calloused fingers were gentle as he rubbed her knuckles almost absently. She held her breath and chanced a glance at his face. His attention was on her palm, thank God. He couldn't see the sweat trickling down her face at the heat his nearness generated.

"Your pulse is pounding, Sasha." He raised concerned eyes to her.

Mother. Fucker. He had to notice.

His gaze ran over her face. "Are you okay?" He pressed the back of his free hand to her forehead.

Christ. "I'm fine," she croaked. She moved her head to remove his hand. He didn't budge.

"Something's wrong." The hand on her forehead trailed down the side of her face. Her panties grew wetter with each stroke of his finger on her cheek. Her pussy swelled and blossomed under his touch.

"Niko."

"Tell me what's wrong." He straightened from his perch on the edge of the sink and released her bandaged hand.

Sasha's hungry gaze traveled down his chest and over those amazing abs. Her good palm itched to stroke him. Niko's thumb brushed her bottom lip. She reacted without thought. Opening her mouth, she flicked her tongue over the pad of his finger.

Niko inhaled sharply. His cock tented his sweats. "All you have to do, ever, is ask." His gaze, alight with the fire she'd ignited, caressed her face. Heat followed close behind.

Sasha smoothed her good palm across his chest, down the hills and valleys of his abs. She leaned into him and ran her tongue along his collar bone. "This is me, asking."

Niko shuddered. "Then I'm saying yes." The words rumbled through the small space.

Sasha brought her lips to his. Niko cupped the back of her neck, plunged his tongue into her mouth. She sighed into his kiss. With her one hand, she tugged at his sweats. Niko unsnapped her jeans, pushed it down her hip. The stupid thing bunched around her thighs and refused to budge. She moaned in frustration.

Niko chuckled and reversed their positions. He pressed a palm to the middle of her back. She bent over the sink and clutched clumsily at the sides. Their eyes met in the mirror. Neither looked away as he guided his cock to her soaked pussy. He slid inside, sank deep. His cock head bumped against her womb. Her eyelids fluttered, lips parted on a

moan.

"More?"

"Please." It would always be more where Niko was concerned. He did the thing again, brushed up against her womb. She tried pushing back against him, but the jeans stuck to her thighs hindered her movements.

"Deeper?" he growled the question as he stared at her in the mirror.

"God, yes!"

Niko grabbed her hips, pulled her back onto him roughly.

"Ugh, damn. This shit is so fucking good."

"It's us. We make it good," Niko rasped. He slammed into her. Sasha's knees crumbled, but his hold kept her upright. Niko groped under her T-shirt, cupped a breast. He squeezed the nipple hard between thumb and forefinger.

Sasha cried out his name. Her pussy stroked his cock in reply. Niko jerked. Fire danced along her nerve endings. The smoke – she sniffed. Smoke! The bread in the oven.

"Something's burning." Niko covered her back with his front and nipped her ear.

"There's – ah, shit. There's bread in the oven."

Niko's hold on her hip loosened. Sasha reached behind her and grabbed his hand. "What are you doing?"

Niko thrust in shallow circles in her throbbing pussy. "I'm getting the bread out the oven, babe. The cabin will burn down around us."

"Fuck the bread. No, scratch that. Fuck me!" Sasha rolled her hips and clamped down on his cock with her pussy muscles.

"Shit!" Like a man possessed, Niko pounded into her. Sweat dripped from his face onto her lower back.

Sasha swiveled her hips, angled her body to the right. He didn't disappoint. "God, Niko, that's the spot. Ahhh, so fucking good!" She trembled as he pistoned into her. The

head of his cock banged against her womb. Sasha contracted around him.

“Fuck! Fuck!” Niko grunted. His hand blazed a trail from her breasts to her clit. He pinched the sensitive nub and Sasha dissolved into a quivering, orgasmic ball. Her climax triggered Niko’s. Behind her, he cursed and grunted as he filled her with his come.

Their heavy breathing and her pounding heart filled Sasha’s ears. She gulped air into her burning lungs. Niko covered her good palm with his and linked their fingers. Sasha stared at their fingers, and swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. It hurt. The thought of never holding him, never touching him again.

She raised her hand with his, and brought it to rest above her left breast. Her heart beat a staccato rhythm as she took in the image they made in the mirror over the sink. She stood with her head thrown back, shirt askew, eyes solemn. Not the way she should look after an orgasm. Niko wore a grim expression as well, though the desire hadn’t yet dissipated from his direct stare.

They both felt it. The end drew near and neither wanted to acknowledge it.

Niko bent and nuzzled her neck. “Why don’t we go see what’s left of the kitchen, huh?”

* * * *

“Tell me something you’ve never told anyone before.”

Niko froze in the process of taking a bite of his tuna sandwich. They’d emerge from the bathroom to find the cabin filled with smoke, so they hurriedly made a few sandwiches—sans toasting—and came outside. Right now, they sat on the steps while the door hung open to air the place out.

Sasha's out-of-the-blue request didn't surprise him, not really. He gave her kudos for waiting as long as she did to ask him anything. She respected his silence. Which was more than she could say about him, right?

He placed the half-eaten sandwich back on the plate, pushed it away. There were a lot of things nobody knew about him. How did he choose?

Sasha turned sideways on the steps below him, regarded with a steady gaze.

Niko licked his lips. "I saw my father kill my mother." He locked his gaze somewhere over her shoulder. That way he wouldn't see the pity in her eyes. He did wince at her muted gasp.

She laid a hand on his knee. Her warmth seeped through the material of the cargo he wore, branded him.

"How? When?"

"I was seven," he said. "My father came home drunk one day and snapped when he saw dinner wasn't ready."

"Oh, my God. Niko, I'm sorry." Sasha's fingers tightened on his knee.

He shrugged away the remembered shock and fear of his seven-year-old self hiding behind the kitchen door. His father never knew Niko stood there. "It was a long time ago."

"Where's your father now, in jail?"

Sasha's voice almost got lost among the memories from way back when, but Niko heard and turned to her. "Hardly. He killed himself right after."

Sasha clasped a hand over her mouth. Her wide brown eyes brimmed with tears. "You saw that, too, didn't you?"

Niko jerked his head robotic confirmation.

"Oh, God!" She got up and came to sit beside him. Her hands framed his face. "How did this happen?"

"I wasn't supposed to be there." He spoke with a

detachment he didn't feel. "I should've been with the kid next door, playing in his backyard. I only came back to get the new baseball gloves I'd gotten for my birthday."

"When's your birthday?"

He took a deep breath. "June eighteenth. That day."

Tears spilled over. They ran down her cheeks, dripped off her chin. "I'm so sorry." Her voice shuddered as she gave in to the emotion Niko couldn't. Trembling fingers stroked his jaw.

Staring into her glittering gaze as she wept for him, Niko's throat worked. Not for the seven year old boy, but for his grownup self. He'd fallen in love with a beautiful, sensitive and certifiable woman he couldn't keep.

Panic settled on his chest like a one hundred-pound weight. He leaned over and gathered Sasha in his arms. She came willingly. Niko buried his face in her neck and she rubbed his back in circular strokes. He closed his eyes and took in the heady fragrance of her skin into his lungs. She smelled of jasmine, smoke and him. A combination he'd never forget.

"Why did it have to be you? Why mock me with a taste of what I want most, then snatch it away?"

Sasha stiffened. The hand on his back crept up his nape and massaged his skull. Niko sighed and tightened his hold on her.

"I can't regret this, Niko." Sasha leaned away from his hold, met his gaze with wet eyes. "I may want to, but I can't regret you and me. Maybe this is all we're meant to have, these few nights."

"Don't say that!" Niko grabbed her arms. He wanted to shake the truth out of her. She loved him. He saw it in her eyes, felt it in her touch, yet she pretended this wasn't as big as they knew it to be.

They loved each other. Niko would be damned if he'd let

her get away.

"Niko..." Sasha's broken whisper tugged at his heart. "We can't do this. It's our last hours together. Can't we forego the arguing for more pleasant things?"

"I'm sorry." He kissed her lips in a soft caress. "What would you like to do with the rest of the day?"

"I want to lie in your arms, feel you holding me tight." She choked up. "I want you to brand me with your heat, mark me with your scent." Her lips trembled, fresh tears fell. "Can you give me what I want?"

Niko brushed the bangs from her eyes with shaking hands. "Every day. All day."

They lay atop the covers, limbs wrapped around each other. Niko rubbed the bottom of one foot up and down Sasha's jean-clad leg. Each time her fingers feathered down his tattooed arm, his stomach muscles contracted.

He sighed in contentment and closed his eyes. They'd been like this for the better part of the day—he looked out the opened cabin door into the gathering dusk. Since they were in the summer season, the days were longer so it should be around eight o'clock by now. He'd got up once to fix them soup and crackers for dinner, then settled right back on the bed with Sasha in his arms. They barely spoke, but no words were needed.

Not between them.

"I'm going to ask you something," Sasha said, "and I need you to not withdraw from me." She lifted her head off his bare chest and met his gaze. "Give me an honest answer, okay?"

Niko nodded and braced for another discussion about his past.

"Why did Vicente order you to kill Terry?"

"I worked for him." He frowned at the unexpected

question.

Sasha shook her head. "No, I meant the reason why he wanted Terry dead."

"I don't know all the details, babe. I didn't question my orders, I only carried them out."

"Don't give me that," she said. "You weren't a robot. Besides, I can't picture you blindly being a yes-man. It's not Niko."

Ah, but he wasn't Niko then.

"I know Vicente hated him, but I never learned why." Niko cupped her cheek. "I'm sorry, but I think it was personal."

"Then I'll have to ask him next time we meet," Sasha said.

Niko's fingers tightened on her chin. "I wish you didn't have to have contact with him. He's dangerous, Sasha, don't sleep on him."

She raised her chin a notch. "Do you want to know what I wish? I wish you'd trust me enough to tell me about Niko Davaris."

"I do trust you, Sasha," he whispered. "You know all you need to know about me. Anything else will be dangerous to you and I won't let it happen."

She searched his eyes and apparently found what she hoped to because she sat up and kissed his lips. "Okay."

"Okay?" Niko chuckled against her mouth.

"Yes, I get it." Sasha hugged him close.

Niko squeezed her. Until Vicente got his due, Sasha wasn't safe. Niko didn't want her knowledge of his true identity to bring her harm. When he finished with Johan, he'd come clean, about his real name and so much more.

Sasha settled over him once more. Her hand went around his waist and she brushed a kiss over his right pec before she laid her head on his chest.

Niko closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 18

Sasha untangled herself from Niko's sleeping embrace and raced to the bathroom. She'd fallen asleep right along with Niko. There weren't any clocks in the cabin to check the time, so she needed the phone. She removed the phone from the toilet tank, switched it on.

The red light flashed. *One new message from King.* The time read eight-forty-five. Sasha opened the message from her brother. He informed her he'd be there a little before the time. Her stomach dipped and rolled.

Niko would feel so betrayed. She'd given him her word and she was about to break it. She couldn't unroll the ball. Besides, Sasha figured the sooner she got away, the sooner she'd forget about Niko.

She BBMed Kingston to let him know she'd gotten the message and headed out the back to take a quick shower. She had plans for Niko before she left.

* * * *

Niko came awake with a jerk. Sasha sat astride him, bare-assed naked. Her heated pussy pressed into his belly while she tugged his hands up above his head.

"What are you doing?" Not that he minded, but still.

She grinned down at him. "What do you think I'm doing? I'm trying to have my way with you."

Niko held still as she tied his wrist with what looked like a piece of her leggings she'd cut. "All you have to do is ask, you know that." He arched up as she ran a hand down his chest. She reached behind her to fondle his crotch.

"Yeah, but where's the fun in that?" She cupped his balls through his sweats.

Niko bit his lip, thrust into her hand. She gyrated and rubbed herself over his stomach. Her slick pussy dripped on him. The air was fragrant with her ocean-scented arousal. Niko's palm itched to touch her. He tugged on his surprisingly tight bonds.

"Ah, ah." Sasha stopped moving and lifted off him. "If you free yourself before I'm ready, I'm stopping." She made her way to the end of the bed and pulled his sweats off.

Niko's ready cock sprang free.

"No underwear?" Sasha grinned. "Naughty boy."

"How am I supposed to touch you, Sasha?"

She stood with her hands on her hip. "I'll do the touching, you enjoy." She climbed up the bed, crawled up his body. Her generous breasts swayed with her movements.

Niko swallowed to wet his dry throat and stared at her. His every nerve tingled in heated anticipation.

Sasha sat on his prone body, legs splayed out on either side of him. She leaned forward until her nipples grazed his chest. He groaned and curled his fingers into his palm. Her moist tongue licked his collar bone. Niko inhaled sharply.

"I love your taste," Sasha whispered. "You taste like sweat, cinnamon and me." She kissed his jaw, his nose and his eyes, then came back to his lips.

Sasha thrust her tongue into his mouth. Niko groaned and bucked as their tongues danced. She rocked against him, wet pussy slid over his cock. He lifted his hips, but she shifted away.

"Not yet," she said against his lips. She dipped her head

to his chest, laved a nipple.

"Ahh." Niko moved his hand to grab her hair, but the knot at his wrist stopped him. He grunted in frustration.

Sasha chuckled and kissed her way down his body. She licked his nipples, placed soft kisses on his abs. Her tongue flicked out and dragged down his left side.

Niko squeezed his eyes shut against the sweet torture. She switched sides and went to work on his right side, nipping at him with her teeth.

Niko rocked into her. "Untie my hands, Sasha."

"Now why would I do that?" Her tongue slid into his navel.

"Damn it, Sasha. I need to feel you," Niko ground out. She wanted to play, huh? He'd make her pay for this.

"You want to feel me?" Her breath heated the head of his cock where it lay on his stomach.

Niko's pulsed leaped. Sasha's mouth closed around him.

"Ah, fuck!" His hips lifted off the bed.

She released him with a pop. "Can you feel me now?" Sasha flattened her tongue and licked the length of him all the way to the base. "What about now?"

Niko panted. His cock swelled even more. He growled low in his throat.

Sasha chuckled. "I'll take that as a yes."

She suckled his cock head. Her tongue slid over the tip of him with practiced movements. Niko whispered her name, tried to fight the electricity gathering at the base of his spine. He rolled his hips. Sasha grabbed his cock and deep throated him in one smooth move.

Niko yelled. The lower half of his body rose off the bed. He dug his heels into the mattress, and thrust himself into Sasha's waiting mouth. His cock head hit the back of her throat. Afraid he'd hurt her, Niko slowed his movements. Sasha dug her fingers into his hips and bobbed up and down

on his length. Her wet mouth sucked him in like a vacuum. Saliva dripped off her chin and ran down his thighs.

"God, babe. You're killing me." Pre-cum oozed out of his slit. She licked it up with a moan. The sound vibrated on his throbbing cock.

Sasha licked down his cock to his balls and took one in her mouth. Niko lurched off the bed. She stroked his pulsing cock as she sucked the underside of his balls.

Fire coalesced in his loins. His body shook as he widened his legs to give her better access. She slobbered his balls, each getting equal attention.

"Sasha, please. I'm coming." Niko couldn't hold it back. The inferno raced up his spine. Sasha's mouth abandoned his balls, but her hand took over. Her wicked mouth descended on the very tip of him. She sucked the head deep into her mouth.

"Ah, God!" Niko pumped his hips, fought to get out of his restraints, but the fucker wasn't moving. "Shit, shit. Sasha, Fuck!" He gave a sharp thrust and flooded her mouth with his come.

She slurped it up like ice cream. "Hmm." She moaned around his load in her mouth.

Niko flopped onto the mattress. His chest heaved, aftershocks wracked his body. Sasha released his semi-hard cock with a pop. She was going to be the death of him.

She came up beside him and licked her lips. "Cinnamon," she murmured.

"Untie me," he ordered. He couldn't wait to dish out some of the torture he'd just endured. He only hoped she could take it.

Sasha shook her head at his request. "Nope, I'm not ready to untie you yet."

"Damn it, Sasha —"

"Why don't we put your mouth to better use, hmm?" She

straddled his face.

Fuck, yes! Niko inhaled her ripe scent. Her heat singed his face. He felt her thighs on either side of his face tremble. His mouth watered.

A lick of his lips, and Niko dove in.

* * * *

Sasha hissed at the first swipe of Niko's tongue on her pussy lips. He licked first one then the other with agonizing slowness. She held on the headboard to keep herself upright. Cream flowed out of her quivering hole and onto Niko's tongue.

He growled and flicked her protruding clit. She gasped and shuddered. He sucked her nubbin into his mouth. Sasha's knees clamped down on his head. He used his head to move her knees aside and when back to administering pleasure his way.

Sasha threw her head back and moaned. Nobody loved her body like Niko. With his bound hands up over his head, he used only his mouth and tongue to turn her into a pliant, throbbing mess.

Niko's mouth slid away from her clit and down to the entrance of her pussy. He paused and rimmed her opening with his stiffened tongue. Muscles contracted as hot cream seeped from her.

"Oh, shit, Niko!" She humped his face as her body tingled. His tongue plunged into her and she screamed. Her nails scratched the wooden headboard. She rocked on Niko's face as he stroked the inside of her pussy. Picking up his bound hands, she brought them to her breasts. Greedy fingers clutched her aching flesh. She closed her eyes and squeezed the hands squeezing her nipples. Pleasure built in her womb and spread to her pussy. Everything centered on

her clit.

Niko must have sensed her impending climax because he turned his attention to her pulsing nub. He sucked it into his mouth, flicked his tongue at the very tip of her hardened clit. He sucked with mind blowing intensity and Sasha couldn't stand the pressure. She grabbed the back of his head and pressed his face deeper into her wetness. He lapped at her frantically.

"Oh, Gawwd!" Sasha held on to the hands at her breasts and came on Niko's face. Her body spasmed painfully. She doubled over with the force of her climax, her breathing ragged. She lost control of her limbs and toppled onto Niko's chest.

Niko panted. She raised her head weakly to look at him. His lips glistened with her juices. She leaned over and licked it off. He opened his mouth and their tongues tangled. She sighed into his mouth. Her spicy taste and his magic tongue made her feel drunk.

"I love the feel of your tongue in my pussy," she whispered to him.

Niko grinned. "I love having my face in your pussy, you taste like the ocean and —"

"Peaches," they said in unison. Sasha leaned away from him and smiled. He smiled with his heart, she saw it in his eyes. She choked up, she'd never see him again.

Oh, God!

She rebelled against the despair trying to pull her under and kissed his neck. "How'd you feel about having your cock buried deep in my cunt?"

He licked his lips while his heated gaze seared her. "I really wouldn't mind it."

Sasha giggled and rolled on top of him. She spread her legs, cradled his hard cock between her thighs. He moaned.

Since he couldn't touch her, she bent, offered him her

breasts. He eagerly accepted a nipple into the wet cavern of his mouth. Sasha rolled her hips over his cock while Niko lapped at her nipple.

The bulbous head of Niko's cock brushed her entrance. Sasha wiggled her hips. It slid inside with a smooth stroke.

They froze.

Sweet desire tickled her nerve endings. She straightened. The position sent his cock deeper into her tightness. Niko hissed and raised his hips. Sasha did a slow grind.

"Goddamn it, Sasha!" He struggled against his bonds.

Sasha picked up the pace. She worked his cock furiously. Niko's hips lifted off the bed in time to her movements. She palmed her breasts, thumbed her nipples. He stared up at her. His nostrils flared, veins stood out in his forehead.

She lifted herself off his cock and slammed back down. He yelled out.

She looked down at him through the veil of pleasure over her eyes. She needed to make this last, it was the last time she'd get to see him like this. Tears filled her eyes. What would she do without him?

* * * *

Niko took note of the change in her mood. "Sasha?"

A tear rolled down her cheek.

Niko stared up at the sex-goddess above him. His cock throbbed a painful beat inside her heated pussy. She'd never looked more beautiful or breathtaking.

Yet she cried.

"What's wrong, babe?"

Sasha came down to lie on his stomach. She kissed his lips. Niko tasted the salt of her tears.

"Remember this," she whispered against his mouth. "No

matter what comes next, please remember this."

What the hell was going on with her? She acted like this would be the last time they'd be together, when they had all night. "Are you okay?" He hoped so, he had a marathon night of loving planned for them. He doubted they'd get any sleep.

Sasha nodded and wiggled her hips. "Yes, I want you to finish what we started."

"Untie me then. I'll fuck you proper, scout's honor." Niko winked and arched into her.

She nipped his jaw. "I seriously doubt you were a boy scout."

"Hey, I—" He'd been about to defend his honor, but Sasha shifted into a new position, sending his cock deeper into her pussy. He couldn't think, much less form a coherent sentence.

Niko grunted and bucked under her. Sasha kissed him and rocked in a delicious rhythm. Her nipples grazed his chest. Pinpricks of electricity sizzled through him. He could spend forever locked in this position with the woman in his arms. Nothing felt as right as skin to skin contact with Sasha.

Niko barely registered the fact that Sasha ignored his request to untie him. All he knew, and all he was, centered on the woman riding his cock with determined strokes. She sat astride him, and moonlight from the opened window over the bed reflected on the upper right side of her body. She stared down at him with heavy-lidded eyes while her pussy contracted around him in silken waves.

He loved her.

Niko shuddered under the intensity of those three words. He met Sasha's gaze. Her eyes widened. She froze. Fat teardrops rolled down her cheeks.

What the hell is going on?

"Sasha." Niko cursed the bindings preventing him from

touching her. Above him, Sasha shook her head mutely and picked up her pace. She gyrated over the tip of his cock.

Niko hissed and tugged at his bound hands. *How had she managed to tie this shit so tight?*

Sasha pinched her nipples. The other hand snaked down to play with her clit. A fresh flood of hot cream bathed his cock.

Niko's balls tightened. He thrust up into Sasha. She slammed down. His grunts and her pants mingled into a harmonizing melody. One he'd never forget.

Atop him, Sasha's body shook. The hand on her clit sped up.

"I'm coming," she whispered in a helpless voice.

"Look at me, Sasha," Niko rasped. Her soaked pussy held him in a choke hold. Sasha's eyes snapped to his. Niko surged up into her. His cock nudged her womb and her eyelids fluttered but didn't close.

"Pinch your clit," he commanded her.

She obliged.

He felt the instant she started to come. Her body stilled for a nano second then her pussy fluttered and contracted wildly. Her climax triggered his. Niko erupted with a hoarse cry and thrust up into Sasha. His come jetted into her waiting channel.

Sasha rode out her orgasm quietly, then collapsed onto his heaving chest. She buried her face in his neck as both their body vibrated with aftershocks. Long after Niko's body quieted down, tremors wracked Sasha. It wasn't until hot liquid ran down his neck and onto the pillows that Niko realized Sasha sobbed.

"Sasha, talk to me. Tell me what's wrong."

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this," she said into his neck. One of her hands stroked his tattooed arm. "I only wanted to fuck you once, get you out of my system. I didn't

want to need you. To crave you more."

Niko smiled grimly although she couldn't see. "It goes both ways, Sasha. You brought me back to life." He turned his head, pressed a kiss to her temple.

Sasha lifted her head and stared at him. The tears clumped her lashes together, her wide eyes glistened. "I'm sorry," she said.

Niko shook his head and smiled at her. "You've got nothing to be sorry for." He rolled his aching shoulders. "Untie me. I'll prove it to you."

Sasha bit her lip. "I can't."

Niko frowned. "Why not?"

A car door slammed outside. Niko's head jerked up.

"Untie me now, Sasha," he hissed. Damn, not now. It better not be Maysin or Justice coming back. He'd fuck their asses up. And if it wasn't them, he and Sasha were exposed. Undefended.

Sasha rolled off him and gathered the sheet around her.

What the hell? "Sasha, now isn't the time."

She stared down at him with a blank expression. Niko tugged and pulled at his bindings, but nothing. She'd looped the knot around the bedpost. He hadn't noticed that before. She'd tied him to the bed, effectively incapacitating him.

"Sasha?" Dread and something else formed an icy trail down his spine. Fear. He hadn't felt that in almost three years.

Bang. Bang. Bang. "Sasha!" Someone shouted from the other side of the door and resumed banging on it.

Sasha flinched at the first bang, but composed herself smoothly. Right before his eyes, she morphed into someone Niko didn't recognize. All expressions were erased from her eyes—they were now cold and distant. Her face remained blank.

She'd left him. Her body crouched down beside the bed,

searched for something, but his Sasha had left the building. Niko's hands fisted. Pain, the likes and intensity of which he'd never felt before, engulfed him. It wasn't physical—that he could bear. This pain he felt resided under his skin, in his chest, in the heart he'd opened for her.

Sasha rose to her feet with her Glock in hand and went to the door. She flicked on the light switch, flung the door open without saying a word. She turned and walked back to the bed. A man dressed in black stepped into the cabin and closed the door.

Niko tensed. He felt exposed and it wasn't entirely because he laid there buck naked.

Sasha picked up the blanket off the couch and draped it over his waist. Her accomplice stood beside her. The guy was huge. Not in weight but mass. He towered over six feet, with massive shoulders and bulging muscles.

Is that who he was, Sasha's muscle? Muscle Man had dark skin, shoulder length braids and he stared down at Niko with the blackest eyes, even darker than Justice's.

"This him?" Muscle Man's quiet voice belied his physique, but triggered Niko's memory.

Kingston. Sasha's brother.

Even after her betrayal, Niko still breathed a sigh of relief.

Sasha nodded at her brother's question. "Kingston, this is Niko. Niko, my brother Kingston. I'm leaving with him tonight."

CHAPTER 19

Sasha ignored her shaky limbs and turned to her brother. She'd never been sorrier to see him in her entire life. She swallowed around the lump of tears in her throat and handed him her gun.

"I'm gonna get dressed, try not to shoot him unnecessarily."

Kingston arched an eyebrow. "What if it's necessary?"

She glanced down at Niko. Hurt swam in his brown eyes, along with accusation and condemnation. He'd stopped pulling on his bonds and his body seemed to tense with every breath he took. His stubborn jaw ticked.

She pivoted and headed to the bathroom. "The only person allowed to hurt him is me."

In the bathroom, she collapsed against the door. Silent sobs wrenched from her in painful gasps. She'd betrayed him. He loved her and she'd betrayed him. She put a trembling hand over her mouth and screamed into it. Her heart squeezed tightly in her chest.

She loved him.

Sasha walked over to the mirror above the sink. Awe and guilt stared back at her. She'd fallen in love with the man that killed Terry. She finally admitted it to herself. She couldn't stay with Niko, he didn't trust her. Not even after all the things she'd told him, and she'd be damned if she'd settle for the status quo. She didn't trust him either.

After splashing cold water on her face, she pulled on a pair of jeans, a T-shirt and her Jimmy Choo knee boots. She tucked the number she'd finagled from Maysin into her bra. Grabbing the duffel bag she'd packed and hid earlier, she walked out the bathroom for the last time.

"I'm ready."

Kingston stood with his back propped up on the cabin door, his face a study in relaxation. Sasha couldn't remember a time when she'd seen her brother flustered. He hadn't batted an eye when he saw Niko on the bed. Maybe he'd simply gotten used to her crazy antics. Not that she went around tying up guys, mind you.

"You're leaving me, Sasha?" Niko asked from the bed.

Sasha handed King her bag and turned to Niko. She blanked her expression, met the storm clouds in his. "We both knew this day would come, Niko."

"Tomorrow," he ground out. "You promised me tomorrow, Sasha."

Sasha shrugged. The casual movement took everything from her. "I changed my mind, Niko. I'm a thief, I can't be trusted, remember?"

He resumed straining against his bonds. "No! I trust you. I—"

"Don't. Say. It." She saw it in his eyes. Love. She couldn't bear to hear it. "Whatever you think you feel, I don't." *When have I turned into such a liar?*

Sasha walked over to the bed and pressed a kiss to his stiff lips. She took his scent and the feel of him into her senses one last time. "Goodbye, Niko."

"Babe, don't go."

Those words, loaded with agony, cut her deeper than any blade ever could. Her eyes welled up. "Did I ever tell you I loved when you called me that?" Her voice shook, she couldn't hide it.

"You want me." Niko's intense gaze held her captive.

"Yes," she answered even though it wasn't a question.

"You need me."

Sasha couldn't look him in the eye anymore – the betrayal and anger gazing back overwhelmed her. She straightened. "Yes, but it's a need I'll get over."

She moved away from Niko and made her way to the door. Kingston held out his hand. She wanted to grab it, hang on for dear life, but Sasha shook her head. Chin tilted up, she opened the door.

Niko's next words stopped her. "I'll be seeing you soon, Sasha."

She forced her feet to move, to walk out the door and down the stairs. Each step took her farther away from Niko and the heart she'd left in his hands. They approached King's truck. She held on to him with cold fingers as he helped her up, buckled her in. Sasha sat in the front passenger seat and stared at the cabin.

Kingston drove away in his usual drag racer fashion. The wind whipped Sasha's hair into her eyes. She imagined she heard Niko calling her name, begging her to come back. Tears slid down her cheeks. Harsh, ugly sounds filled her ears. Something heavy sat on her chest; she couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

But she felt. Oh, how she felt.

The pressure on her chest burst open. Sasha doubled over. The truck braked.

She almost slid out of her seat, but her brother gathered her in his arms.

"It's okay, let it out," King rubbed her back.

Sasha clung to him. She buried her face in his neck and sobbed. She cried for Terry, whom she'd betrayed long before she met Niko. She hadn't loved him enough, couldn't love him the way he wanted her to. She cried for Niko

whose love scared her, because she wanted it too much. And Sasha cried for herself, because she had no idea how to go back to a life without Niko.

Kingston held her close until her sobs turned into hiccups and the flood of tears slowed to a trickle. Sasha leaned away from him and wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

"Here," King said. He reached into his glove compartment and handed her a box of tissue. He watched while she blew her nose and dried her eyes.

When she couldn't take any more of his scrutiny, she frowned at him. "What?"

"You're scaring me," King told her in his soft spoken way. "I've never seen you like this, not even when —"

"Don't say it." Her eyes misted over again. He'd been about to reference Terry's death. She'd walked around like a freaking zombie, afraid people could see the betrayal through her glass-eyed façade.

"You love him," King said.

Sasha stilled. "Who?"

King smiled. His onyx eyes sparkled. "You're in love with this Niko person, Sasha. Why are you running away?"

She blinked and faced forward in the vehicle. "Let's go."

"We're not done," King promised. He started the truck and looked at her. "Why are you here, bawling your eyes out, when you could be with Niko?"

"Just because you're bigger than me doesn't mean I won't kick your ass." Sasha crossed her arms over her chest, stared straight ahead. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts, not have a heart to heart with her nosy brother.

"But I don't understand."

"He killed Terry!"

"What?" Shock rippled across Kingston's face.

"Damn it! I didn't want you to find out like this." She rubbed her brother's shoulder as he drove.

"He killed Terry and you're doing him?" Kingston raised unbelieving eyes to her.

She waved his expression away. "Don't look at me like that. The instant I found out, I sent you the message to come get me."

"But still!"

"I didn't know. I didn't know, King," she whispered. "I only knew I'd never felt so...alive and free."

Kingston nodded. "What happens now?"

"Right now I've got a call to make, so hand me your cell." Sasha fished discreetly under her T-shirt for Maysin's number. "I need you to get everybody together for a meeting at the warehouse tomorrow."

"Kay. Who're you calling?" Kingston handed her his phone.

Sasha stared at the number scribbled on the piece of paper. "Niko's friend."

* * * *

Maysin stared at the computer monitor. Harper Royce hadn't walked through the doors of her home more than two seconds ago, but he sensed something wasn't the same.

It'd be the same feeling she'd have in a little while. Once she stepped into her office, she'd know all her work had been in vain. He refused to feel sorry for her. If she had listened, he and the guys wouldn't have had to resort to drastic measures.

The cameras in her home weren't meant to do anything other than watch her routines. Since Maysin installed them, he'd been in charge of removing them. He removed some, but not all because he had to get his Harper fix. All the time she'd been gone, he'd stared at her empty living room and office. He missed her there, guzzling coffee like water, her

nose buried in some legal document or other.

He hadn't installed cameras in her bathroom or bedroom. As much as he'd like to see Harper Royce naked, he wouldn't do anything like that. He held out hope she'd ditch the pussy she called her man. Then he'd make a move. He had a need for the ambitious lawyer and nobody else would do.

He sat on the edge of his bed and lit a cigar. Harper dropped her bags on the floor and walked from the living room to her office in the back of her ranch-style home. His gaze clung to her curves in the sundress, the lithe movement of her hips. She was a study in hard and soft, he couldn't wait to learn all he could about her body.

On the computer screen, Harper entered the office and stopped short. Maysin saw what she saw. The computer dismantled piece by piece. The papers burned to ash in a pile in the fire place. Upholstery torn and strewn everywhere. And the yellow Post-It note on her telephone receiver.

Harper walked further into the room. She eyed the mess with a blank look on her face, like she couldn't possibly be staring at her most important case disappearing before her eyes. She looked around the room, snatched up the Post-It. He mouthed the words written there, words he'd penned. *You were warned. Angel can't help you now.*

Harper's legs folded under her. She dropped to the carpet like a dead bird. Maysin stood.

His phone rang.

"Fuck!" He yanked his cell phone from its charger next to his nightstand and looked at the number. He didn't recognize it.

He flipped the phone open. "Yeah."

The caller inhaled sharply. "Maysin?" a female asked.

He frowned. "Yeah, who's this?"

"Go up to the cabin, Niko needs you." The familiar voice wobbled.

"Sasha?"

"Yep."

"What happened?" Maysin kept an eye on Harper curled into a ball on her office floor. She hadn't moved. He hauled on a pair of jeans over his boxers.

"Nothing happened," Sasha said. "I left, that's all."

"You left?" Maysin found it hard to believe Niko would let Sasha go. And if he didn't let her go then — "Did you hurt him?" He swore to God, he'd never hurt a woman, but if Sasha laid one finger on Niko, he'd make her pay.

"Physically, he's untouched."

"Sweet God," Maysin whispered. Niko couldn't handle something like this again. He grabbed his leather jacket and his car keys.

"Why did you do this, Sasha?" Maysin touched a finger to Harper's still figure on the computer and walked out his bedroom.

"Because I can't trust him. I still have no idea who he is, not really." She choked up. "Don't let him find me, Maysin."

Maysin walked through his kitchen and into the garage. He unlocked the door to his Mustang and hopped in. "I don't think I can do that, Sasha."

"Then goodbye, Maysin." She hung up in his ears.

* * * *

Harper couldn't move. Her body had turned to stone. She curled up on her side and rubbed her temples. The splitting headache started the instant she walked into her office.

Johan Vicente made good on his threats. He'd destroyed all her evidence against him. She didn't have to go into the downtown office to know the copy she stored there had

been destroyed as well.

Everything she'd worked so hard for had been in vain. She'd been relegated to the starting point once again. She'd have to call Angel.

Angel.

She scrambled to a sitting position. The pain in her head darkened her eyesight for a brief moment. Harper reached for the telephone in slow motion. She dialed the number she had for the CI, but the automated female voice informed her the number had been disconnected.

"No!" She pulled the phone jack out of the wall, flung it across the room. The walls were closing in. The pain in her head ratcheted up. Things were finally coming together, and now this.

Failure wasn't an option. Not when she'd come so close.

She held on to the edge of her desk and forced herself to her feet. She'd get some pain pills for this monster of a headache and then she'd figure out her next move.

It's high time she stopped lying back, waiting to be fucked. She needed to participate. And she'd get hers, too.

CHAPTER 20

Niko sat on the cabin steps with a beer between his knees and his head in his hands. It took him twenty minutes of stomping at the headboard, his body contorted in a U-shape to finally break the bedpost and slide his bound hands out.

She'd left him.

Niko couldn't get past it. He could've easily driven after them, after all he knew where Sasha lived, but the weight of what she'd done turned his head to mush. He couldn't think. She promised him Monday and she reneged.

He stared unseeing out into the dark night. A cool breeze chilled the sweat on his naked back and shoulders. Crickets chirped, fireflies danced and Niko missed her. He rubbed a hand over his heart. Since Sasha walked out the door, the pressure in his chest had grown progressively worse. She took his breath with her when she walked away and Niko had to get her back.

He couldn't breathe without Sasha.

The rumble of an approaching vehicle reached his ears before Maysin's Mustang came into view. Niko sipped his beer, waiting for his friend to park and exit the vehicle.

Maysin slammed the car door shut behind him and walked to Niko in small steps.

Niko placed the beer bottle back on the step and narrowed his eyes. *What the hell is Maysin doing here?*

"You good?" Maysin stood in front of Niko with a raised eyebrow, concern on his face.

"She called you." Niko shook his head. That's why she wanted Maysin's number. She'd planned her escape last night. Most likely after she learned about his deception regarding Vicente.

"Yeah." Maysin sat at the bottom of the steps and gazed up at the sky. "She wants me to dissuade you from going after her."

"Huh, you don't say." Someone stopping him from being with the woman he loved, this he'd like to see. "Are you going to try?" Because he'd really hate to hurt Maysin.

Maysin shrugged. His attention remained on their moonlit surroundings. "I think Sasha's good for you, so I say do what you gotta do. The problem now, of course, is what she'll do to me when she realizes I gave you my blessing." Maysin turned to Niko. "She scares me a little bit." A smile played on his lips.

Niko chuckled. "Yeah, I know that feeling."

"So what now?" Maysin grabbed Niko's beer, took a swig.

Niko got to his feet and took a deep breath. Time to go back to the real world. "Time for a plan of attack."

"Does this plan of attack involve me? 'Cause I don't think you understand how much your woman scares me." Maysin remained seated.

Niko barked a laugh and marched into the cabin. "Don't worry, you and J will provide backup at a distance. Where is he anyway?"

"On assignment, visiting our chilly neighbors to the north," Maysin said from behind him. "He should be back in a day or two."

"Alright then." Niko headed the bathroom to get dressed. Maysin whistled and Niko looked over his shoulder.

"Nice work." His friend nodded at the state of the cabin.

In addition to his breaking of the bedframe, Niko had torn the place apart. The mattress stood against a wall, the couch was over turned and clothes littered the floor. A few fist-sized holes decorated the walls as well.

"Thanks. I try." Niko escaped into the bathroom under Maysin's watch and closed the door.

He had to decompress, wrap his mind around everything that happened over the weekend. More than anything though, he needed Sasha. If she thought he'd walk away, leave her alone after what they shared, then she really didn't know him. And if she counted on anybody acting as a buffer between the two of them, he'd be more than happy to show her differently. When it came to Sasha and him, all bets were off.

If she forgot, Niko would be more than happy to remind her.

* * * *

The elevator dinged. Sasha leaned into Kingston as the door slid open.

Penthouse. Her floor.

"Can you walk?" Kingston turned to her with the same look he'd been sending her all the way here. Pity mixed with concern mixed with a whole bunch of other sappy crap.

She sucked her teeth and elbowed him out of the way. "My heart is broken, not my freaking feet." Stepping into the hallway, she walked the few steps to her door. She stopped short in front of the heavy oak door. Sasha's raw throat worked. She reached out a shaking hand to touch the smooth surface.

Her brother laid a hand on her shoulder. Sasha rested her forehead against the door as tears slid down her cheeks.

"I can't do it," she said around the burning in her throat. "I can't have memories of Niko in the place I lived with Terry."

Kingston used the spare key she'd given him to open the door. He kicked the door wider and placed her duffel bag inside.

He held out his hand to her. "Come on, you need to get some rest. Tomorrow you'll be able to think clearer."

Wordlessly, Sasha took his hand. He led her past her living room straight into the bedroom. There, he scooped her up and placed her on the bed. Kingston unzipped her boots and tugged them off, then he pulled the covers up and over her.

"Are you hungry?" He looked down at her with his black eyes and Sasha choked up.

She covered his hand with hers where it hung by his side. "Thanks for taking care of me."

Dime-sized dimples appeared in Kingston's cheeks. "You're my sister and I love you. Besides, you'll owe me big time."

Sasha bit back a smile. "Yeah, I figured."

"So, how about a snack?"

She shook her head back and forth on the pillows. "No food. Put on some music and then you can leave."

Kingston knelt beside the bed, turned her to face him with a finger under her chin. "I'm not leaving you here alone, so get that out of your mind."

He stood and walked over to the sound system he'd set up for her. He fiddled with some buttons and John Mayer's *Your body is a Wonderland* wafted through the room.

"Shit, sorry."

"No, leave it," Sasha said. She'd been listening to the CD the night she broke into Niko's room at the hotel. The night she saw him naked. She'd fallen asleep listening to music

and thinking of him.

Kingston swung around to face her. "Are you sure?"

Sasha nodded.

"Okay." He walked over and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'll be on the couch if you need me."

"Thanks. By the way," she said as he exited the bedroom, "did you let everyone know about the meeting tomorrow?"

"Yeah, they'll be there," Kingston said.

"Good."

Kinston switched out the light and closed the door behind him. Sasha squeezed her eyes shut, tried to block out the images playing out like a movie behind her eyelids. Images of her and Niko in the rain, on his bed, in the pond. She missed him already. His touch, his smile, the way he held her tight. His scent, his taste.

She sunk her teeth into her bottom lip to stop the whimpers threatening to burst from her throat. He'd come for her. Sasha knew it as well as she knew her own name. He wouldn't accept her decision. Hell, right now she couldn't accept her decision. Niko saw through her, he saw what she tried so hard to hide and he knew she loved him. There was no way he'd let her go.

Sasha dug her fingers into the mattress. John Mayer's raspy ballad gave way to Tamia's smooth voice on *Can't get enough*.

She stared up at the ceiling and prayed for sleep.

* * * *

Maysin followed the Range Rover downtown for Niko to check out of the hotel room he'd insisted on renting. Then they drove to Maysin's house where Niko would spend the night. He refused to even set foot in the house he'd been renovating for almost three years. It seemed his friend

waited on something, but Maysin couldn't figure out what it was. It couldn't be Sasha, he'd been avoiding the house long before she entered the picture.

Maysin ushered Niko into the spare bedroom and hastened to his. He needed to check on Harper. He closed the door behind him and switched on the computer monitor. Maysin's first thought was Harper hadn't moved from the spot she'd been in when he left. He reached out, caressed her still form on the cold glass surface. Harper shifted as if she felt his touch. She rolled to her left side and the hand caught under her body flung wide.

Her palm opened and a pill bottle slid out.

Maysin's heart stopped. Pills littered the floor next to Harper's body.

"Oh, God. Harper, no!" Maysin snatched up his car keys and yelled for Niko.

"What's happening?" Niko appeared in Maysin's bedroom wearing only his boxers, his SIG 220 raised.

Maysin pointed to the camera. "I'm headed over there. Call me on my cell if anything happens. When you see me, turn off the monitor."

"Did she try to kill herself?" Niko lowered his gun and squinted at the monitor.

"I hope not," Maysin said grimly, "because if she did, we drove her to it." He turned his back on Niko's openmouthed expression and walked out the room.

Maysin's brakes squealed as he pulled into Harper's driveway. He jumped out of the car and headed to the back of Harper's house. The sliding glass doors leading to the pool were a burglar's dream. He used his pocketknife to jiggle the locking mechanism. With an audible click, the doors unlocked.

Maysin stepped inside and turned right. He knew the

layout of Harper's house better than his own. He raced to her office, skidded to a stop when he saw her. Like Niko told him when he called, she hadn't moved. Maysin rushed to her side and dropped to his knees.

"Harper. Baby, wake up." He lifted her head off the floor and cradled it on his lap. Choppy breathing came from her parted lips. Her skin felt clammy, her normally vibrant mahogany complexion was ashen.

Maysin brushed her hair from her face. He'd dreamt of holding Harper in his arms, but not like this. He couldn't take her to the hospital. She wouldn't want anyone to see her like this. The press couldn't get wind of it either—it would spell the end for her career.

He scooped her into his arms and rose to his feet. "Harper, you've got to wake up. Let me see those gorgeous brown eyes." Maysin headed out the office. Pills crunched under his foot with every step he took. He walked down the narrow corridor leading to her bedroom.

Although he'd never been inside her bedroom, Maysin pushed open the familiar door and stepped inside. Her bed was huge and inviting. He placed her gently on sheets a lighter shade than the royal blue blanket. Her head rolled back on the pillows covered in chocolate brown cases with blue and white flowers. They matched the drapes covering the floor-to-ceiling glass windows.

Maysin sat at the edge of the bed and pondered his next move. He needed to flush the drugs out of Harper's system and that meant a whole lot of water. He debated whether he should call someone. How would he answer the obvious questions?

"Looks like you're stuck with me, tigress." Maysin stroked Harper's cheek. "I need you to fight to come back."

She didn't move, but her breathing smoothed out. Maysin raced to the kitchen and got a pitcher of water out the fridge

and a glass. On his way back, he stopped and picked up the empty pill bottle of the office floor. He wasn't familiar with name of the medication, but soon as he got a chance, he'd Google it.

Back in the bedroom, Maysin dipped a rag in cold water and pressed it to Harper's forehead. She stirred and a ragged moan escaped her.

"That's it. Come back to me, Harper."

He lifted her head against his chest, brought the glass of water to her lips. He pressed two fingers on either side of her cheeks and her mouth gaped open. With infinite care, Maysin dripped the water into her mouth and down her throat.

Harper's body came alive. Her eyes flew open. She gasped and sputtered. Legs kicked out.

"Harper, calm down. You're okay, drink the water." Maysin spoke softly while he stroked her hair.

Her chest heaved and she gulped air through her mouth. Glazed eyes locked with his. Her throat worked, but only squeaks came out.

"What is it? Do you want to say something?" Maysin put the glass of water down on her nightstand and sat up straighter. "Alright. My name is Maysin and I found you like this. The how and why we'll discuss later. Right now I need to flush the pills out of your system."

Harper shook her head. "I didn't. Not on purpose," she croaked.

Maysin smiled at her. "You have no idea how happy I am to hear that. Now, tell me how much you took."

She swallowed and held up six fingers. That's when he saw it. The huge ring. How could he have missed it? She'd gotten engaged.

"You're, ah...you're engaged."

She nodded.

Maysin brought the glass of water to her lips and she sipped.

"Do you want to call him?"

"No!" The word rushed from her mouth. Her gaze flew to his. She licked her lips. Maysin followed the movement with his eyes. "No one can know about this."

"Okay, but keep drinking the water." He brought her to a sitting position and piled pillows behind her back. "I'll stay the night to make sure you're alright."

The glass in her hand toppled to the brown carpet. "That's not necessary." Her hoarse voice tugged at Maysin's nerve endings.

Kneeling, he picked up the glass. He put it back on the nightstand and looked at Harper. Something flickered in her eyes, something akin to fear. Maysin hastened to alleviate them—the last thing he wanted was for Harper to fear him. Even if she should.

"I'm not a threat to you in any way, Harper." She on the other hand was a constant threat to his libido. "If I wanted to harm you, I'd have already done it." He brushed a finger down her cheek. "You're starting to get your color back."

She stared up at him with wide eyes, the first time he'd ever seen his tigress speechless.

"I won't hurt you, Harper. I only want to help," Maysin said. He glanced at his watch. "It's after three in the morning, so why don't you try to get some rest? I'll sleep outside on the couch."

Harper covered a yawn with her palm. "In the morning you'll tell me exactly how you happen to be in my house, Mr. —"

"Call me Maysin. In the morning I'll tell you whatever you want to know." He planned to be long gone by the time she woke up. He pointed to the pitcher of on her nightstand. "Make sure you drink the water."

"Yes, Maysin."

The sound of his name on her lips hardened Maysin to a steel pike. He pivoted before she saw his arousal. "Goodnight, Harper." He turned out the light on his way out the door.

"Goodnight, Maysin. And...thanks."

Her words stayed with him as he settled himself on her couch. Maysin turned off the light as his cell phone rang. He looked at the display. Niko. "Yeah."

"Are you out of your fucking mind? Are you forgetting who this woman is?"

"Didn't I tell you turn off the monitor when you saw me enter?" Maysin leaned his head back on the arm of the couch.

"You've got to be kidding me with this shit."

"Niko, I have to take care of her." Maysin tried to make his friend understand.

"Where's the pussy she hangs around with? Why can't he do it?"

See, even Niko thought Harper's fiancé was a pussy.

"He's her fiancé and I don't give a fuck where he is as long as he's not here." Maysin rubbed his forehead.

"Remember who she is, Maysin. She can really hurt us," Niko said.

Maysin sighed into the phone. "I know all these things, Niko. But the thing is...she's my Sasha." He closed his eyes against the admission of his feelings for Harper. Silence echoed on Niko's end.

"Niko?"

"I get it," his friend said grudgingly, "like you knew I would. Make sure you know what you're getting yourself into." He hung up.

Maysin flipped his phone shut.

"Um, Maysin?"

Maysin jumped off the couch and ran to the bedroom. He flipped on the light switch. Harper lay half-on, half-off the bed with her sundress tangled around her shoulders.

"Harper?"

"Don't just stand there, help me." Her voice came out muffled.

"Yes, ma'am." Maysin grinned. He approached the bed and sat on the edge next to Harper's flailing body. He grasped her waist and lifted her back to the middle of the bed. His fingers flexed on her hip before he reluctantly drew his hands away.

"Let me." His voice sounded deeper than usual. Harper stilled. Maysin smoothed the dress down her body.

"The zipper's on my left side."

The side Maysin sat closest to. "Okay, lift your arm."

She lifted her left arm and he felt around on the dress for her zipper. He found the hook and dragged it down slowly. The hiss of the zipper and Harper's breathing were the only sounds in the room. Her face was turned away from him, but her chest rose and fell with every breath she took.

The gaping zipper exposed Harper's bare skin to his hungry eyes. Maysin swallowed. Fuck! Sweat pooled under his armpits. Harper turned to look at him. The movement caused his knuckles to graze her skin.

She gasped. Maysin's breath froze in his lungs. He chanced a glance at Harper. Her eyes were on his face, on his mouth. Wonder and desire flashed in her eyes. Hot and bright. Maysin's gaze went to her lips. They were parted, in invitation perhaps? She licked them.

Jesus H! His cock twitched in his jeans.

Maysin cleared his throat and moved away from Harper. From the temptation she presented and the fire she stoked with her mere presence.

"There, all done." His voice shook only a little.

Harper blinked. The moment disappeared. "Thank you."
She gathered the dress around her, waited for him to leave.

"You're welcome, Harper. Goodnight, again."

Maysin felt her eyes on him all the way out the door.

CHAPTER 21

Morning came, and with it, harsh realities. Sasha blinked against the sunlight assaulting her swollen eyes. Much as she'd like to languish in her self-imposed misery, there were things she needed to do today. Specifically she had to bring the members of the gang up to speed. Not about Niko, no that was her business, but about Johan Vicente and his threats. She also had to bring Vicente's flash drive to him.

The cause of all her misery.

She sat up and swung her feet over the edge of the bed. On weak legs, she walked to her bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth. Sasha froze with the toothbrush halfway to her mouth. She looked like crap. Her eyes were wide and red rimmed, her color dulled and her hair a bird's nest around her head.

Guess a trip to the hairdresser was also in order.

Almost fifteen minutes later, she stepped out into her living room. She'd managed to drag a brush through the mop on her head and dressed herself in a pair of dark blue jeans, frayed at the knees, and a black tank top. She dressed like she was in mourning.

On some level, maybe she was.

She tiptoed around, trying not to wake the giant asleep on her couch. She scribbled a note for Kingston, telling him she had his truck — her car still sat at the warehouse — and they'd meet up later.

She pulled the door closed behind her and headed out. Time to get Johan Vicente out of her life for good.

"Sasha Forde to see Mr. Vicente." She spoke into the video camera mounted to a pillar at the entranceway to Vicente's humungous estate. The heavy wrought iron gates slid open with a clang.

"Come through, Ms. Forde."

She flashed her pearly whites to the camera and stepped on the gas. It took almost forever to drive down the curved driveway. On either side sprinklers hummed, watering the perfectly manicured lawn. She pulled up in front of the palatial monstrosity Vicente called home and hopped out.

"Ms. Forde, this way please."

One of Vicente's lackeys, wearing all black and sporting a headpiece, popped out of nowhere and ushered her around the side of the property to the pool area. Vicente sat at a table under the shade of a huge umbrella, a young girl by his side. The table overflowed with food.

Sasha's neglected tummy grumbled.

Vicente looked up from buttering a bagel and waved her to a seat. "Ah, Ms. Forde. Join us." The girl next to him seemed to shrink into her white wicker chair at the request.

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry." Sasha slid into the empty chair next to Vicente's mousy breakfast companion. "Let's get down to business." She waited for him to shoo away the female.

Vicente's dark eyes met hers over his coffee mug. He was a good looking man, if you went for the old, pot-bellied type. Sasha didn't. His wavy salt and pepper hair was gelled back within an inch of its life. Wrinkles lined his too-tanned face and neck. His white dress shirt and matching pants were probably starched while someone else wore them. The gold ring on his finger winked every time he moved his

hand, which appeared to be all the time.

"Show me," he ordered.

"What, here?" She looked pointedly to her right shoulder, at the female who sat with her chin to her chest.

"Don't mind my daughter, she's completely loyal." He stared at the young woman. "Isn't that right, Elina?"

"Si, Papa." The words were a whisper.

Sasha's breath left her lungs in a whoosh of air. Niko's Elina.

"Say hello to Ms. Forde," Vicente said.

What the hell? He treated his daughter like a freaking kid!

Elina twisted in her chair to face Sasha. "Hi. It's nice to meet you."

"You, too." Sasha held out her hand and Elina took it in a timid handshake. Her huge dark eyes were wide in her pale face. Her hand trembled.

Scared. Elina was scared of her father. Who wouldn't be?

Sasha smiled at her. "You've got quite a grip there, m'girl." She didn't. Elina's smooth palm was all skin and bones.

Elina dropped her hand, but not before Sasha saw the flicker of a smile in her eyes. Damn, the chick was seriously repressed. How could Niko leave her here with a monster for a father?

Vicente cleared his throat. "Now show me the information, Ms. Forde."

"You'll need a computer." Sasha played with the chain around her neck.

Vicente snapped his fingers at one of the bulky men standing off to the side. "Bring me the laptop." The man rushed off only to return seconds later with a white laptop, already powered up.

Sasha removed the chain holding the flash drive from her neck and handed it to Vicente. He plugged it into the

computer and punched some keys.

"Well, I'll be damned." Vicente smiled his creepiest smile yet at Sasha, bared teeth and all. "You did it, Ms. Forde."

"Indeed I did." She rolled her eyes. Like there was any doubt she'd succeed.

"I'll destroy this immediately," Vicente said. He pushed his chair back and stood.

"Um, not so fast, Papi." Sasha reached below the table, pulled out the Glock tucked inside her boots. She got to her feet, gun behind her back. Time for hardball. "I broke into Harper Royce's office to get the evidence because you threatened the people I care about."

Still seated at the table, Elina inhaled sharply.

"You're rehashing the unfortunate incident, why?" Vicente frowned as if she'd offended him.

In slow motion, she pointed the gun at him. Aimed at the middle of his forehead. Elina squeaked, cowered.

"You killed Terry Garraway. I want to know why." Sasha caught his men's hustled movements from the corner of her eye. Almost a dozen semi-automatics were trained on her. Fingers steady, she willed her clamoring pulse to calm. This was beyond reckless, but at least she stayed consistent.

Answers. She needed them.

Vicente took a step toward her. "Don't be ridiculous, put that thing away. My men will shoot you where you stand."

"There are extra copies of that drive somewhere out there in the ether." She met his smarmy gaze and spoke slowly. Had to make sure he understood every word. A thunderous expression settled over his ashen features with each word she spoke. "You're a man of the world so you should know what my next line is. Don't expect the local cops to come knocking, I'm talking alphabets here."

She tilted her chin pointedly at her Timex. "The first envelope should be sent out in fifteen minutes. Unless, of

course, I leave here unharmed before then."

"You're bluffing."

"Yeah?" she chuckled. "You feel like taking the chance that I'm not?"

The men around them stood with hands on their weapons, waiting for his word. Beside Sasha, Elina sat frozen. Sasha waited, too, for Vicente to see she wasn't afraid of him. She only feared the fates of the people she loved, and for them she'd do anything.

"I misjudged you." His fingers tightened around the drive.

Sasha thought of Niko. The first time she saw him with that drive in his hand. She fell a little in love with him then.

"Yeah, your mistake." She released the safety on the Glock. "Now talk."

With a sigh, Vicente waved his men away. They faded back into the background like the members of Destiny's Child not named Knowles. Sinking back into his chair, he motioned for her to do the same. She waited until he sat before taking a seat. The gun she put down on the table, her finger remained on the trigger.

"I learned about the gang through some business connections. There was a shipment of guns I wanted, so I approached Garraway about getting it. He said no."

Sasha frowned. Terry never mentioned anything about that to her. "Did he give his reasons?"

Vicente shrugged, ran a hand over his head. The gelled hair didn't move. "He didn't deal with mobsters. It didn't matter the amount of money I offered. He just laughed and shook his head."

"So that's it?" Sasha's shrill voice rose. "You had him killed because he told you no?"

"He disrespected me in front of my men and business partners." He put his elbows on the table, leaned toward her.

Hard, soulless eyes bored into her. "Nobody disrespects me and lives."

"You really are a monster, aren't you?" She felt like tearing his eyes out with her fingernails.

He leaned back, folded his arms across his chest. "How did you find out about this?"

"Wouldn't you like to know." No way would she mention Niko's name to him.

"You're a tough bitch." His mouth curved in a self-deprecating smile. "A huge misjudgment on my part."

"No need to kiss my ass. Damn!" Sasha's galloping pulse slowed to a trot. "You shouldn't feel too bad about misjudging me, mightier men than you have tried fucking with me. It's not my fault they never make it past the foreplay."

"This isn't over between us, Ms. Forde." He didn't bother to hide the promise of retribution in his murderous gaze.

"I say it is. Now, why doesn't the lovely Elina walk me out?" Sasha stood and waited with bated breath until Vicente jerked his head in the semblance of a nod.

Elina rose from her chair and took Sasha's hand. She pointed to the exit. "This way, Sasha."

Sasha walked side by side with Elina. The criminal's daughter was a frail slip of bones.

"Are you okay?" Sasha asked under her breath.

"Yes, I'm fine," Elina said. She kept her gaze straight ahead. "I'm glad you got one over on him."

"Me, too." Sasha chuckled. "The expression on his face was priceless."

"Si." Elina glanced at Sasha. Laughter danced in her eyes.

They stopped in front of Kinston's truck. Sasha held out her hand. Elina took it and Sasha pulled her close.

"If you need anything, come to club *Wik'd*," Sasha whispered in her ear. "I own it with my brother. Ask for me

and I'll come, no matter what."

She let go and hopped into the vehicle. A brief wave at Elina and she drove the fuck up outta there. Whatever possessed her to say that to Elina? She was Niko's Elina, but she needed help and Sasha would help if she could. The fear in Elina's eyes was a familiar sight. She'd seen it in the mirror staring back. Granted Sasha hadn't seen it in a while, but she knew the feeling and if she could spare someone, she would.

Sasha understood how Niko would love Elina. That girl desperately needed to be loved with a father like that. She didn't get why Niko left and didn't take Elina with him. There really was a lot she didn't know and might never now about the man she fell in love with. And that remained his fault, not hers.

She shook her head and tried to erase Niko from her thoughts. She headed downtown. Time to come clean with Kingston and the rest of the gang.

* * * *

Harper jolted awake. The scarred face of a stranger roamed her dreams. That same man was in her home. She sat upright, only to lay back down when she heard the footsteps headed in her direction.

She pulled the blanket up to her chin to cover the thin camisole and panties she slept in.

The door creaked open.

Harper closed her eyes and tried to calm her heavy breathing. She didn't want the man named Maysin to know she was awake. She didn't want to look into his captivating green eyes and wish. His footsteps slowed when he came alongside the bed. A light touch caressed her cheek.

Her knees got weak. How in the hell could her knees be

weak when she was lying down? His lips brushed her forehead, soft and firm. Harper's skin tingled.

"Goodbye, Harper," he whispered and then his warmth disappeared. He walked away.

Harper gripped the mattress. She fought the urge to call him back, to beg him to stay. It wasn't right, wasn't in the plans. The door opened and she spoke.

"You're sneaking out." She opened her eyes, sat up.

Maysin froze with his hand on the doorknob. "Yes."

"Why?"

"You have questions." His fingers around the knob flexed, but he made no move to look at her.

"As well I should." She sat straighter and tucked the blanket under her body.

"I can't answer them."

Now she stilled. "Can't or won't?"

His wide shoulders moved in a tight shrug. "Whichever works, I guess."

"But you promised."

"I never promised." Maysin swung around with a fierce scowl. The scar on his face stretched hypnotically. Harper stared at it. He was gorgeous with that scar. She could only imagine him without it. Her skin did the tingling thing again and her nipples beaded.

He affected her.

His attention dropped from her eyes to her chest. Harper followed his gaze. Her nipples poked against the white cotton of her top.

She swallowed, met his eyes again. "I'm engaged," she whispered, more to remind herself of what remained at stake.

"Yes." Maysin walked toward her. She tracked his movements until he stood next to the bed, looking down at her with heated green eyes.

"I'm not a cheater," she murmured over the pounding of her heart.

Maysin caressed her lower lip with his thumb. "I know that, Harper." He sat on the edge of the bed, his head turned to her.

Liquid heat pooled between her legs at his nearness. Harper bit her lip to quell a moan. "I only need you once." Her voice shook and quivered. She detected a hint of begging, but she chose to ignore the aberration.

Maysin held back. "This won't happen again, Harper. I don't poach."

"Okay." She nodded at his serious expression.

A smile curved his lips and he leaned over. Harper met him halfway. Sparks jolted her at the contact of their lips. Her mouth opened on a gasp and his tongue swooped inside. They groaned as one when their lips touched. Harper's legs turned to soup. She reached up. Fingers tangled in Maysin's hair, held on for dear life.

Maysin swirled his tongue around hers. Harper moaned. Heated cream spilled out of her cunt and soaked her panties. God! She'd never felt so on fire before. Who was this man? Maysin's thumb swiped across her nipple. She cried out. He swallowed it. Her back arched, pushing her breast into his palm. He growled and squeezed her flesh.

Harper released Maysin's hair and sank her nails into his shoulders. She tugged him until one of his legs was draped over her and the other hung off the bed. They never broke the kiss. Maysin tore away the blanket from her body with one hand. His other palm traveled down between her breasts and across her quivering tummy. Harper's legs moved restlessly until he reached his goal, her melting core. He cupped her through the material of her panties.

She opened her legs wider. His cock, huge by the feel of him, strained against her thigh. Maysin pulled her soaked

underwear to the side, dipped a thick finger inside her overheated pussy.

Harper jerked. She broke the kiss and gasped for air. Maysin finger-fucked her with hard thrusts and she rolled her hips and enjoyed the ride. She forgot everything, the fake relationship, the fake engagement and Isaiah's blackmail.

Maysin's thumb flicked over her clit as he licked his way down her body.

"Maysin," she whispered his name like a prayer. He nibbled on her contracting stomach and moved lower, until he was eye to eye with her weeping core. He paused, looked up at her. Harper moistened her lips. His lust-darkened eyes flashed.

He kept his gaze on her as his tongue snaked out and flicked across her clitoris.

"Aah!" Fire danced on her nerve endings. Harper's hips lifted off the bed, her heels dug into the mattress. Maysin stroked a path from her clit to her ass in one swipe of his tongue.

"Ah, God! Maysin."

Maysin buried his face in her cunt, nose and all. Harper squeezed her eyes shut and gave herself over to the sensations threatening to take her under. Maysin's tongue slid inside her. He licked her like a cat, slurped at her cream like a starving man, then went back to her clit. He sucked the nubbin into his mouth and hummed. A finger pushed inside her slippery cunt. Fresh cream oozed out of her core. Maysin lapped it up with a growl.

His teeth nipped her clit, the barest of nips yet she felt it all through her body. Two fingers scissored inside her pussy. Maybe on purpose, maybe not, a finger pressed against that hidden place and she screamed and came. All over his fingers, all over his tongue.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" She chanted the words over and over as her cunt contracted around Maysin's fingers. Sticky juices bathed his face. Her over-sensitized body vibrated, she couldn't catch her breath.

"Harper."

She opened her eyes. Maysin stared at her, she stared back and then the tears fell. Suddenly she was bawling while Maysin scrambled to his knees and hugged her to him. She cried on his shoulder, something she hadn't done in a long time—with anyone. She remembered the freedoms she was no longer allowed. And she remembered under whose thumb she really was, it wasn't Maysin's pleasurable digit.

Harper sniffed and raised her head from Maysin's shoulder. "I'm sorry, that shouldn't have happened." Don't ask her to specify which *that*.

Maysin stiffened. He lifted his head and met her eyes. "Do you love him, Harper?" His deep voice echoed in the room.

Harper raised her chin, matched his serious demeanor. "Yes."

He flinched.

She really should've gone into acting—she didn't give away her lie with the thump of her heart or her sweaty palms. A solitary tear escaped from behind her frozen eyelids and slid down her cheek. Maysin leaned forward and kissed it away.

"Goodbye, Harper," he murmured against her cheek. He pulled away, but she stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"I won't forget," she said. She pressed a kiss to his scarred jaw. "Take care of yourself, Maysin."

He nodded and climbed off the bed.

Harper buried her face in the pillows. She didn't see him leave, but she heard the door open and close. And she felt

Maysin's absence almost as if he'd taken a part of her, of her heart with him.

CHAPTER 22

Sasha pulled up to the warehouse as Kingston hopped out of a taxi.

He turned and stared at her as the cab drove off. "Where've you been?"

She jumped down from his truck. "Not now." She walked past him, only to stop short. Her Jag sat in the exact place she'd left it, but memories bombarded her. Niko. She squared her shoulders and marched into the warehouse.

She'd be damned if she allowed that fucker to mess with her head again.

One step into the warehouse and she couldn't breathe. Sweat beaded on her forehead, her fists clenched and unclenched. She froze in place and squeezed her eyes shut. A movie played behind her eyelids in slow motion. Her backed up against the center column, Niko thrusting into her. Moans and screams, her screams, filled her ears.

"Are you okay?"

Sasha jumped at the sound of her brother's voice in her ear. Her eyes flew open and she swallowed. "Yeah." She cleared her throat. "Never better."

Kingston raised an eyebrow, but wisely kept silent.

Sasha strode into the lighted room. The other members, three in total, all lounged around the empty space. Abby, the gymnast/contortionist Terry enticed away from circus life, waved up at Sasha from her seat on the floor. Her legs were

folded in under her long red skirt. The butterfly tattoo under her right eye fluttered when she smiled.

"What this about?" Will, their certified geek, pushed away from his spot against the wall and approached Sasha. "I was about to head out to —"

"Let me guess. A computer convention?" Expert in antiquities and collectibles, Khan, slid out of the shadows with a finger to his temple. The gold circle in his nose glinted when he scowled. A pair of dark sunglasses covered his eyes.

"Um, no." Will flushed a beet red against his pale skin. A lock of brown hair fell into his eyes when he shook his head. "I had a, um, thing."

"A thing?" Khan's reddish-blond eyebrow lifted to his receding hairline. "Is that what they're calling it?" Every word he spoke sounded like an insult with the British accent.

Sasha clapped her hands together. "Alright, children. Let's play nice, hmm?" She motioned with her hands. "Gather 'round."

The men drew closer and Abby rose gracefully to her feet. Sasha envied the hell out of her the way she moved. Sure she could flip and tumble with the best of the cheerleaders, but Abby's movements were poetry.

When they'd formed a semi-circle around her, with Kingston at her side, she confessed. "We've been compromised."

Silence greeted her words as each person tried to process it.

Khan spoke first. "How?"

She shrugged. "I have no idea how. I got a visit one day from Johan Vicente."

A collective gasp rocked the room.

"The mobster?" Kingston stared at her.

"One and the same." Sasha nodded. "He knew our names

and all our jobs.”

“That—that’s impossible,” Will stuttered. “I make sure there’s no trace of us anywhere.”

Sasha smiled grimly and patted his bony shoulder. “You did good, Willy. Vicente knew Terry. He was the one who had him killed.”

Abby covered her mouth and wept silently.

Khan patted her shoulders and looked at Sasha. “You know this for sure?”

“I do.” She glanced at Kingston from the corner of her eye. He stood with his arms folded, thunder in his dark gaze. “I recently learned this from the man who killed him.”

“Oh, my God!” Abby raised red-rimmed eyes to Sasha. “You know who he is?”

“Who is it?” Khan asked.

Sasha slid a look over to the pillar in the middle of the room. It mocked her. “He’s a man I’ll never see again, but he confessed to me. He had no idea why Vicente wanted Terry dead, he only carried out the order.” She swiped at her watering eyes. “Anyway, Vicente wanted me to bring you guys in for one last job. Stealing evidence a lawyer had against him.”

“How long ago was this?” Kingston asked. He turned to face her fully and she had to look away from the anger in his eyes. She’d fucked up, she should’ve told him, but she didn’t regret it.

“Uh, a week or so.”

“Damn it, Sasha!” Kingston grabbed her shoulder. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He promised to turn our names over to the FBI and he threatened the Hughes.” She begged Kingston with her eyes to understand.

Her brother stiffened when he heard her soft spoken words. “The Hughes? Why?”

"Who the fuck knows why? Added incentive? I don't know," she cried. "The point is, I didn't want to involve you guys." She looked around at the faces staring back. "You'd already moved on with your lives. The Shadow Gang is no more, it was just me. I chose to do it myself."

"But it wasn't just you," Kingston snapped. "I deserved to know. We all deserved to know."

"I made a decision," Sasha said firmly, "and I don't regret it. Besides, I completed the task way under the time we usually take for something like this."

"And that makes it alright?" Khan asked.

"I meant it wasn't a difficult job." No, not difficult. More like heart wrenching.

"So Vicente got his stuff? That means we're good right?" Will's wild gray eyes jumped from Sasha to Kingston and back again.

"Yes, I took care of him. He'll never fuck with me, with us, ever again." If he valued his freedom. Johan Vicente struck Sasha as a man who valued freedom more than anything else.

"And the man who killed Terry?" Khan watched her closely. "He gets away with no punishment?"

"The man who killed Terry got his due, trust me," Sasha said. Her heart leaped and banged against her ribcage. Standard response when she thought of Niko.

"So that's why you called us back together? To tell us we've been compromised?" Will asked.

"Yes." Sasha nodded. "I wanted to tell you face to face that I'd resolved the situation." Her damn eyes filled up again. "I miss you guys, but I want you to be happy and safe. That's one of the reasons I did the job alone. We dissolved the group and we remain dissolved."

She hugged Will, then Abby. "Send me a postcard once in a while to let me know you're alive." She held out a hand to

Khan. He hesitated, then grasped it and pulled her into an awkward bear hug.

"Take care of yourself, Sasha." He pulled away, saluted and pivoted. He strode to the doorway, with Abby on his heel. At the door, Abby turned and waved. Then she left.

Sasha ran to the door.

Abby climbed into Khan's car and they drove off with a tap on the horn.

"Aha, I knew those two were together." Smiling through her tears, she turned back to the room. Kingston threw an arm around her shoulder. Sasha leaned into him. She owed him much more than what she'd given the others, but right now the words couldn't come.

Will strode up to them with a black book bag thrown over one shoulder. He handed Sasha a business card.

"What's this?"

He smiled crookedly. "My new business venture. I'm opening an official software business."

"Way to go, Will." Kingston released Sasha to slap Will on the back.

"Yes, congratulations." Sasha grinned. "You're going all legit and shit."

Will blushed. "I'm finally following my heart." He moved to the door and turned back. "Call me if you need me." He waved and disappeared.

Sasha stared up at Kingston. He opened his arms and she melted against him. She buried her face in the front of his shirt.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. Weariness and relief mixed with the pain in her chest pressed down and threatened to flatten her. She grabbed fistfuls of Kingston's shirt.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead and rubbed her back. "He'd be proud of you," Kingston whispered.

"Hmm, who?"

"Terry. I think he'd be happy if he could see you right now."

Sasha pulled out of Kingston's arms. "You think so, huh? After I went and fell in love with the man who killed him?" She'd betrayed Terry in so many ways she wouldn't be surprised if he decided to haunt her ass.

She walked outside the warehouse. From the sound of his footsteps, Kingston hurried to catch up.

"He loved you, Sasha. He'd want you to be happy," Kingston said.

She reached her car and leaned against it. "Like this? With this person?"

Kingston came to a stop in front of her. He shrugged. "I don't know, but he's not here. You are. Are you going to live the life you want or the one you think a dead man would want?" He held out his hand. "Keys?"

Like a robot, she handed over the keys to his truck with her mouth open. When did her brother get to be so smart? Kingston grinned and unlocked his truck. He climbed in and dangled her purse out an open window.

"Here's your bag."

Sasha stepped forward and held out her hands. He dropped the handbag.

"I'm off to the club to do some inventory," he said. "What about you?"

"I'm going home to hide under the covers for a while. No disturbances, please."

He grinned and started his truck. "I love you."

Sasha smiled back. "I love you, too," she choked out.

He drove away and she stared after him. She had the world's best brother. When she got over her own fucked-up mess, she'd see about getting him a woman. She wanted nieces and nephews.

Sasha dug into her purse for her car keys. She unlocked

the car door and got in. Her brother's words rang in her ears. Whose life did she want to live? Most importantly, could she live without Niko?

She gripped the steering wheel with both hands. Ever since she left that cabin, she felt empty, hollow and off her game. She'd never felt as alive as when Niko stood by her side, when he held her in his arms. When he loved her with his eyes and his body.

Goddamn him! Sasha banged her head against the steering wheel. He knew what he was doing, loving her so good.

He made her love him and now she couldn't escape it. She couldn't escape him.

Sasha stepped on the gas and sped out of the warehouse parking lot.

She could try.

The phone rang again.

Sasha pulled a pillow over her head. "Ungg!" No disturbances, damn it!

Ring. Ring. Ring.

"Fuck!" She sprang upright and snatched the phone cordless phone off its base. "Who the fuck is this?"

"Turn on the TV."

"King?"

"Turn on the T.V, Sasha. Now." He sounded like he spoke through clenched teeth.

"Fine, hold on." She got off the bed and walked out to the living room area. She really should put a TV in her bedroom. "Care to tell me what all this is about?"

"Just hurry, Sasha."

"Okay, damn." She sat on the tan couch and grabbed the remote off the glass coffee table. "What channel am I going to?"

"It doesn't matter, turn the damn thing on."

Sasha rolled her eyes at his stank attitude. She turned on the TV and wondered at King's tone of voice. "What's the matter with—oh, my God!"

There big and bold cross the screen were the words: *BREAKING NEWS. Local mobster Johan Vicente found dead in his home.*

Video played of men lifting a bagged body on a stretcher and pushing it into the County Coroner's van.

Bile rose in Sasha's throat. "King, I was just there with him."

"You won't say anything to anyone about it," Kingston said harshly. He breathed in her ear. "He deserved what he got."

"By me?" she asked. "You think I did this?" She couldn't decide if she felt flattered or angry at her brother.

"You said you took care of him, that he'd never bother us again."

"Yes." She stood and began to pace her living room floor. "I meant I'd given him what he wanted and kept some insurance. I told him if anything happened, they'd be sent to the authorities."

"Then the cops will know you've been to see him. They'll come knocking soon, Sasha." Worry colored Kingston's voice.

"And I'll be ready," she said and hung up. Her bravado crumpled and her knees gave out. She fell to the floor. The phone slipped out of fingers long frozen.

Johan Vicente had been killed. She didn't feel for him, not one iota. One face danced before her eyes. One word made its way past her stiff lips.

"Niko."

CHAPTER 23

Niko stared at a picture of Sasha, frozen on Maysin's computer screen. "Erase it."

Maysin shook his head. "I can't. The cops already have copies of Vicente's surveillance tapes. By all accounts they already know about her."

Niko gritted his teeth to keep from shouting. Sasha had visited Johan Vicente's estate this morning and thirty minutes later he was found dead. He refused to accept the possibility she'd killed him.

Sasha didn't kill people, she stole from them. He killed people and he should've been the one to kill Vicente, but someone beat him to it. Someone who wasn't Sasha.

"She was probably bringing him the flash drive." Niko spun away from the computer and wiped a hand over his face. He couldn't catch his breath. She was out there, without him. A roaring noise filled his ears. His heart beat. He was scared for her.

"I should've taken him out sooner," Niko said. "If I did, he wouldn't be making trouble for the woman I love. Again."

"You can't blame yourself," Maysin said from behind him. "We couldn't see this one coming."

"We should have." Niko took a shaky breath. "I should've seen it." He shook his head. "Even dead that motherfucker is fucking with the people I love." He grabbed his car keys off

Maysin's computer desk. "What did you find out about Kingston Hughes?" he asked. The quickest way to Sasha was her brother. Niko didn't want to go to the house she shared with a dead man.

"Kingston Hughes, formerly Kingston Ellis, owns the number two nightclub this side of New York called Wik'd. His business partner is one Sasha Hughes." Maysin tapped some keys on the computer. "I have his home address and his phone numbers."

"I don't think I want to announce my arrival," Niko said. "I'd best wait to catch him at the club later." He headed up Maysin's basement stairs. "I need some air, but keep pressing your contacts down at the police station. I want to know what happens when it happens."

Maysin nodded. "Done."

Niko's need for air took him way across town. He sat in his Range opposite Sasha's building and eyeballed the front door. People came and went, but never her. He ached. His body, his heart ached for her. Did she feel the same? Was his Pink Lady missing him like he missed her?

He couldn't stay angry at what she did at the cabin. He hadn't been straight with her. He didn't tell her about his and Elina's baby and why he wanted Johan dead. He didn't allow Sasha the chance to really know him, so how could she love him?

"Fuck." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. She belonged with him, they both knew that. The sooner he found Sasha, the sooner he could explain why he kept silent.

She needed him almost as much as he needed her.

* * * *

Sasha stared out her car window at the office building. She cracked her gum and considered her options. The voice of

the detective on the phone sounded nice and warm – maybe she didn't need a lawyer. But on the other hand she did subscribe to the old adage *better safe than sorry*. Sure, she hadn't been living up to that recently, but hey, extraordinary circumstances were at work. She'd gotten sucked in to the force field around Niko Davaris.

Her cell phone went off. She fished it out the purse on her lap and checked the caller ID. Miles. Persistent much?

She pressed talk. "What's up, Miles?"

"Hey, I was wondering if we could get together later."

Sasha rolled her eyes. Time to put a stop to this. "Sure, but meet me at the club instead. I'm on the road right now." Ending it with Miles had nothing to do with any decision she'd make regarding Niko. Miles had run his course.

"Okay, what time?"

She checked her Timex. "Make it around nine."

"Cool, I'll be there," Miles said.

"K, see ya." She hung up, grabbed her purse and hopped out of the car. In the middle of the street, she dodged traffic, then dashed into an expensive looking lobby.

"Hold the elevator, please," she called. Her heels clacked against the marble floor as she ran to get into the elevator. The elderly man and woman in there stared as she stepped in.

She blew a bubble with her gum and winked at the old man. "Going down?"

He blushed and turned his face away.

Sasha grinned and met the woman's eyes.

The old bag's mouth hung open.

* * * *

Harper sat at her desk with her chin in her palm. Her body was present, but her mind remained in her bedroom. A

tremor shot down her spine. Part fear, part desire. She feared what Isaiah might do if he ever discovered her betrayal. So much hinged on Isaiah's not being riled up.

Her actions with Maysin would definitely rile Isaiah.

Desire fought with fear for equal billing. She hadn't felt something so intense in never. She did her duties in the bedroom with Isaiah because it was part of the deal. She'd perform her duties or else he'd blow her world apart. Pleasure wasn't a part of the deal. Neither was enjoyment or emotion.

She couldn't remember her last orgasm before Maysin. She gave up on pleasuring herself, another form of punishment. Maysin blew the lid off her needs. Now they lay exposed. Open for all who looked closely to see.

Harper sighed and fanned herself with a folder on her desk. At least she'd had some good news today. Johan Vicente had been killed. She sent up a silent prayer for forgiveness even as she smiled. Whoever killed the monster deserved a medal. She wished she'd have the nerve to do the job.

She shook her head. If she did have the balls to kill someone, Isaiah topped the list.

Her office door flew open. "Harper Royce, I presume?"

Harper nodded. A woman stood in the doorway in black leggings and a black motorcycle jacket zipped midway up. Her breasts spilled out of the jacket and her dyed pink hair was swept away from her face. Dark glasses hid her eyes. Circular holes were cut into the leggings, leaving much of the skin on her thigh exposed. She wore a pair of royal blue booties with gold accents on her feet.

Harper frowned. "Do I know you?"

The newcomer grinned and stepped into the office. "Not yet."

Natalie, Harper's Secretary, appeared seconds later. "I'm

sorry, Ms. Royce," she said, red-faced. "I turned away for only a second."

"It's okay, Natalie." Harper waved her away. "I've got this."

"Yeah, Natalie. She got this."

Her Secretary nodded and left, closing the door behind her.

"Nice office."

Harper turned to the woman now sprawled in the chair opposite her. "What can I do for you, Ms..." She lifted an eyebrow and waited.

"Sasha Forde." Her mouth lifted at the corners. "We've got some common interest, Harper. So I think we'll get along rather well." She removed her sunglasses and tucked it into her hair.

"What can I help you with, Ms. Forde?" Harper stared into Sasha's twinkling eyes and resisted the urge to hide her valuables.

"Oh, please, call me Sasha." Sasha leaned forward and placed her palm on Harper's desk. "After all, we're about to be best friends." She grinned one of those shit-eating grins Harper hated on Isaiah. The one that said he had a juicy secret and he couldn't wait to tell it.

"You have sixty seconds to tell me what you want or I'm calling security." She leaned back in her chair.

Sasha burst out laughing. "Oh, I like you. I doubt the rent-a-cops would catch me, but you're right. Business first." She steepled her fingers. "You've heard about the death of Johan Vicente." Not a question.

"Who hasn't?"

"I've been called down to the police station to speak to detectives." She used finger quotes at *speak*.

Harper's eyes widened. "Why?"

Sasha shrugged. "Maybe they have me on video leaving

his mausoleum minutes before he's found dead?"

"Mausoleum?"

"Have you seen his house?" She shook her head. "It's a fucking tomb."

"Did you kill him?" Harper found the notion hard to believe. Sasha didn't strike her as the type to use violence, but then again Harper didn't know the tiny person sitting across the desk.

Sasha pursed her lips. "I know a lot of people contemplated offing Vicente." She looked at Harper pointedly. "I don't know who actually killed him, but it wasn't me."

"Do you have something to say to me, Sasha?" Harper grew impatient with the feeling Sasha knew more than she said. She looked at Harper like she knew her thoughts. Which was impossible.

"Hmm?" Sasha arched a brow. "Oh, am I not being clear enough? Sorry, I meant to say you more than most have reasons to want Johan Vicente dead."

Harper's blood slowed to a crawl in her veins. She presented her best poker face when she asked, "What are you referring to?"

"Rest assured I'm not blackmailing you," Sasha said in a low tone. "I want you to represent me because you're good." She stood. "Shall we go? I've got a hair appointment, plus I've got to cut off my jump-off."

Harper couldn't catch her breath. What did Sasha think she knew? Could she know Harper's secret? Another person to worry about, to placate. She couldn't do it. Not again. Beyonce's *Diva* blared suddenly and made her jump.

Sasha dug into the purse on her lap with an apologetic smile. Her hand emerged holding her cell phone. "Yeppers." She listened, then turned abruptly away from Harper. "Elina? You did what now? Yes, of course. Meet me at *Wik'd*."

I'll be there by nine o'clock. Bye."

"Was that Elina Vicente?" Harper stood up. What was Sasha getting her involved in?

Sasha nodded. "Yes, she needs someone to talk to. I'll be there for her, until she finds somebody else." She stared at Harper.

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" Sasha blinked.

"Like you expect me to do something." Because she couldn't, no matter what she wished otherwise.

"You're really uptight, aren't you? When was the last time you had your back blown out by that pussy posing as your man?" Sasha raised an eyebrow. "I'm guessing never. You should try it sometime."

Harper sputtered.

Sasha grinned and waved a dollar bill under Harper's nose. "I expect you to accompany me to the police station, as my lawyer," she said. "That's the extent of my expectations regarding you, Harper." She turned and walked to the door.

Harper hesitated for an instant before she grabbed her purse and followed. Apparently she was on Sasha's good side—she didn't want to see what the bad side entailed.

CHAPTER 24

The boys in blue bought her story of dropping by Vicente's mansion to visit her friend, Elina. It helped that Elina already told them the same story and called Sasha to give her a heads up.

Sasha smiled as she walked into the club she owned with her brother. She and Harper only spent a couple hours down at the police station. From there she headed to the hairdresser and then to get her mani and pedi. A quick trip home to shower and change and she felt brand new. Her black strapless-and backless-mini fit like a second skin and the gold caged Loubs added a couple extra inches to her height. That was always a good thing.

Now she had to get rid of Miles.

She spotted him seated at the horseshoe shaped bar staring at the TV mounted to the wall. Johan Vicente's death still dominated the news.

She hopped onto the stool next to Miles and motioned to the bartender. "A ginger ale, Timmy."

Miles turned to her with a wide smile. "Hey." His mop of sandy blond hair had been chopped into a crew cut.

"Hey, yourself. Been here long?" The bartender brought her ginger ale, complete with a lime slice and she smiled her thanks.

Dressed in a blue button down and khakis, Miles shook his head at her question. "No, about fifteen minutes or so."

"Do you want to go downstairs?" Wik'd had three levels. The top, accessed through a side door of the building, was for the regular bump and grind. The middle housed the bar and lounge area, whose entrance overlooked the parking lot. Right now a handful of people sat the bar area. For those who just wanted to chill with a game of pool and a drink, they had the much quieter basement.

"Sure." Miles grabbed her drink as well as his and hopped off his stool.

Sasha followed. "Oh, Timmy..." She turned back to the bartender. "If a woman named Elina comes looking for me, I'm downstairs."

The bartender nodded and Sasha followed Miles down the stairs. A cloud of fragrant smoke greeted her as she stepped into the wide open space decked out with six pool tables and six round tables with two chairs each. Two red couches sat against the dark-colored walls on opposite sides of the room.

Kingston sat in one, a blonde twig-like creature in his lap.

Sasha steered Miles past him with a shake of her head. The other occupants of the room, all men engaged in games of pool, nodded and waved as she walked by. She returned their greeting in kind.

They chose a table at the back of the room and she sat facing the stairs—to see Elina if she came in. Miles sat opposite her and took hold of her hand.

Sasha took a breath and looked into his crystal blue eyes. She dreaded doing this, but it needed to be done. Out of all her other jump-offs, she liked Miles the most. He didn't try to change things, never insinuated himself and he was safe. There wasn't any fear of coming to feel more for him than friendship.

"Miles—"

"Before you say anything, I want to say I care about you

very much." He laced their fingers and brought it to his lips. His eyes bored into her.

Unease nipped at Sasha. Her gaze narrowed. Over in the distance, Kingston laughed at something his female companion said. Miles' attention never wavered from Sasha's face.

Damn it!

"I want to be more to you, Sasha," he said. "I've come to care deeply for you."

Ah, gad! Why? She shook mental fists at the heavens. Why?

Sasha glanced away from his eyes brimming with hope. Now she really felt like shit. She had to break his heart. Damn! How dare he do this to her? No feelings, no strings. That was the rule.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I had no idea you felt like this."

Miles released her hand and cupped her chin. Sasha tensed.

"I didn't know, either." A bright smile played on his face. "I went away for a few days and I missed you like crazy." A hint of red colored his cheekbones. "It had little to do with the sex and everything to do with you. I—I love you, Sasha." He exhaled and looked at her expectantly.

All Sasha could see, all she could hear was Niko. The look in his eyes when she told him she was leaving with Kingston. Devastation. She'd devastated him with her cowardice and her need to hide who she was. Niko had been right when he called her out on that.

"Sasha?"

She blinked. Miles' handsome face came into focus. Such a great guy—kind, attentive and eager to please her. What could be better?

Love. Her love for a man who loved the real her. She'd allowed Niko to see her and he didn't run.

Sasha grabbed Miles' hand, leaned forward. "Miles, I like you very much. You're a great catch for any woman. But that woman isn't me."

"What are you saying?" Miles frowned.

She sighed. "I'm saying I don't feel the way you do. I can't, I'm in love with someone else."

"You've been seeing somebody else?" Miles snatched his hand away. Anger and betrayal burned in his eyes. Where had she seen that look before?

"Don't give me that, Miles," she snapped. "We agreed no ties, besides, let's not forget Asia who wanted to scratch my eyes out when she saw us together."

He flushed. "We had an agreement."

"Yes." She nodded. "We agreed we'd have fun with no strings and no expectations. I kept up my end."

"And the man you love?" Miles' lips thinned. "Does he know about me?"

Sasha chuckled. "He knows way too much, if you ask me."

"You're different." Miles' gaze on her face narrowed.

She scowled and glanced down at herself. "Different how?"

"Not on the outside, although you've never looked sexier." He waved a hand in front of her face. "I can't explain it, but your attitude is different somehow."

"That's a good thing, I hope." She smiled, glad this talk didn't turn into a bad situation.

"I think it is," Miles said. He stroked her cheek. "Are you happy, Sasha?"

Tears stung her eyes. She bit her lip and nodded. "I will be, I promise."

"That's all I want," Miles said. "Your happiness. If this man makes you happy, then I'm glad."

"Thanks, Miles. I really appreciate that."

He nodded and stood up. "Well, I should leave." A dejected look settled over his features.

"Will you be okay?" Sasha got to her feet and walked around the table toward him. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you what you wanted to hear."

Mile shook his head. "Don't worry about it, we can't dictate our feelings."

Much as she'd like to sometimes.

Sasha reached over and hugged him. She tucked her chin into his shoulder and squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm so sorry."

Miles hugged her back. A little too tightly, but she didn't protest. She had one more person to see before she went in search of her linebacker. Would he make the search hard or easy?

Sasha opened her eyes. Her breath froze in her throat. She stared. Niko stared back. He stood at the bottom of the basement stairs, dressed in all black. Maysin stood beside him, his gaze on her as well.

Oh, God! Sasha's knees gave out. She moaned and her hands fisted in Miles shirt.

"Sasha, are you okay?" Miles pulled away and looked at her with questioning eyes.

Was she okay? The damn man had found her before she wanted to be found. She looked from Niko, to Miles, and back again. "I'm—I'm fine, Miles."

Niko took a step in her direction. Maysin grabbed his arm. Kingston jumped to his feet with his hand held out.

Sasha took Miles' hand. "Let me walk you out."

She led him to the front of the room. Ignoring the men staring at her, she walked right by Niko. Up close she saw the muscle in his jaw flex. Kingston fell in step with her and Miles, who appeared gloriously oblivious to the heated tension.

"What's up, Rick?" She brushed Maysin's shoulder and

continued up the stairs without missing a step.

Her knees wobbled and her heart rivaled the pounding music on the third floor, but she kept her composure. With Kingston as her shadow, she kissed Miles on his cheek and waved goodbye as he climbed into his car and sped off.

"Are you okay?" Kingston asked.

"Do I look okay?" She spun away from the door and braced a hip against the bar. "Timmy, I need a pen and a piece of paper."

"Sure thing, boss. Here." The bartender handed her a receipt book and a pen.

"Thanks." She scribbled down her address on the paper. "Give this to the —"

"Sasha?"

She turned at the soft voice. Elina stood in the doorway in a pair of faded jeans, white cami and black and white high top Converse. Her brown hair framed her pale face and wide eyes.

Boy, this was a mess.

"Elina, hi." Sasha turned to Kingston. He looked at Elina with a curious frown on his face. "Elina this is my brother, Kingston. Kingston this is my friend, Elina Vicente."

She ignored her brother's shocked expression and grabbed Elina's shoulder. She shoved the piece of paper in her hand. "I'm sorry, but I have to run." Sasha's gaze went to the basement stairs, no movement so far. It wouldn't stay that way.

"This is my address," she told Elina, "meet me here tomorrow, anytime." She didn't wait for a reply. She turned toward the door.

"Don't. Fucking. Move."

Her body froze midstep. Winged creatures fluttered in her stomach and she gulped air into her lungs.

"Hey, man, she doesn't want to deal with you right now,"

Kingston said.

"Look at me, Sasha."

Everything stilled. The music seemed to drift farther and farther away until she couldn't hear it at all. She wasn't ready.

"Sasha?" Kingston called her name.

"It's okay." She swallowed and turned slowly. "I'm okay." Biggest lie ever!

Niko stood near the top of the stairs with his legs apart. His body seemed on the verge of flight, ready to strike at any second. He held his hands down to his side, where they clenched and unclenched.

Maysin stood beside him, eyes wary.

Niko took his time and walked toward her. Kingston and Maysin shifted simultaneously. The pulse in her throat galloped in expectation. Every step Niko took sent a sliver of awareness down her spine. She waited for him until he stood inches away from her.

"So you've made your choice?" His gaze had darkened to almost black. Heat poured off him and onto her.

Sasha basked in it while she found her tongue to ask, "What are you going on about now?"

"The white boy," he grated. "Is he who you want?"

"What does Miles have to do with anything?" She frowned. His eyes flickered when she said Miles' name.

"You went back to him?" His voice scraped against her nerve endings like sandpaper.

"No, I didn't go back to him," she said, indignant. "What makes you think that?"

"You were just with him, Sasha." Niko took another step forward. "I guess what we had didn't mean anything to you."

Her breath caught. How dare he stand there and tell her what she felt? Fury blinded her. Before she realized it, her

hand flew out. She punched him dead in the mouth. Pain exploded in her wrist and danced up her arm.

Niko staggered backward with a hand to his jaw. "What the hell was that for?" He rubbed a thumb across his lips. It came away tipped in red.

"Fuck you!" Her voice and body shook as one. "You know better than to say that shit to me. It meant everything." Tears ran down her cheeks. "You took it all from me."

"What did I take, Sasha?" His voice melted her insides. Turned her into a quivering mass of heat and emotion.

"You took me. You took my heart," she whispered.

Flames leapt in Niko's eyes. "You did the same to me, babe."

A sob caught in her throat at the familiar endearment. She moved toward him.

"Cole?" A tentative voice asked.

Elina. She'd forgotten about Elina.

Niko froze at the name. Elina stepped out from behind Kingston, paler than before, if that was even possible.

"Elina?" Shock rippled across Niko's face. That's right—he and Elina knew each other intimately.

"It's you," Elina whispered. She walked up to Niko and touched a trembling hand to his face. "Cole, you're alive. *Madre Dio*." Her eyes rolled back in her head and she crumbled to the floor.

"Oh, my God!" Sasha cried.

Niko and Kingston sprang into action. They crouched beside Elina on the floor.

"Is she breathing?"

"Do mouth to mouth."

Kingston spread out over Elina and proceeded to administer CPR. Sasha stood by helpless as the men fought to resuscitate Elina. She'd forgotten about Niko and Elina's

past. No, not Niko. Cole, the name of the man she'd fallen in love with.

She stared at him as he coaxed Elina to breathe. She'd fallen in love with the man. His name didn't factor into it. Whatever his name, she loved him and wanted to be with him.

Elina stirred on the floor.

"She's coming around."

Sasha took a step back. Then another. Before she committed to Niko, she had one more important thing to do. Then the rest would be up to him.

While the men helped Elina, she made her discreet exit.

CHAPTER 25

Niko helped Elina to a seat at a table and looked around for Sasha.

She'd vanished.

He tamped down on his frustration and sat down next to Elina. She had a bump on the back of her head, but appeared to be fine. Kingston brought a glass of water for her and she sipped it as her gaze remained on him.

"How did you know it was me?"

She shrugged. "Your voice. I hear it my dreams every night." The water glass shook, so she put it down on the table.

"Lo siento." Niko steadied her hand with his.

She shook her head at his apology. "No, you don't have to apologize," she said. "I'm responsible for it all." Tears thickened her words.

"Elina, you can't blame yourself for everything. Your father was a monster."

"Si. And I wanted to get away so badly I seduced you and got pregnant." She raised her eyes to look at him. "I knew if I had your child you'd take me away from him, but in the end his hold on me tightened." Tears poured down her face. "He killed you." Tremors wracked her body.

Niko pulled his chair closer and wrapped his arms around her. "It's okay," he said. "I'm okay now."

"You have a new face," Elina pointed out.

"Yeah. The old one wasn't working for me anymore." He chuckled to lighten the mood.

She pulled out of his arms. "You're still dangerous."

He smiled and shrugged. "It's a dangerous world out there, E."

"How long have you been around?"

Niko's eyes flicked over to the bar where Maysin and Kingston sat. Kingston had his phone out and seemed to be reading a message. From Sasha?

Elina cleared her throat.

"Oh, ah—I've been around for almost two years."

"And you didn't think I needed to know you were alive?" Her eyes grew wider.

"I couldn't take the chance your father would find out," he told her.

"Of course." She nodded. "You had plans for him. *Venganza*."

"I did want revenge, but along the way things changed." Like his priorities. "I didn't kill him." As much as he wanted to.

"Alright." She took another sip of her water. "Tell me about you and Sasha."

"What? I should be asking you that question." He couldn't believe Sasha and Elina knew each other, much less that they'd become friends. Leave it to his Pink Lady to befriend his ex.

She smiled. "She's like you. Dangerous."

An understatement, if ever there was one. "That she is."

"I sat next to her as she thwarted my father at his own game." She told him about Sasha's meeting with Vicente that morning.

Love and pride swelled in his chest.

"You love her because she's your equal," Elina said.

"I love her because she's many things, some good and

some not so good."

"Where is she?" Elina looked around.

"She disappeared, she's good at that. But she'll be back."

Maysin and Kingston walked up to them.

"Everything good?" Maysin asked.

Niko and Elina nodded.

"My sister sent me a text," Kingston said. "She's got one last thing to do, then she'll be home." He turned to Elina. "Her apologies for leaving so soon, but she hopes to see you tomorrow. I'm supposed to take you home."

Elina stood up with some help from Kingston. Maysin's cell phone rang. He answered it and handed it to Niko with a grin.

"It's for Cole."

Niko's lip twitched. He took the phone and put it his ear. "Yeah?"

"So, Cole, is it?" Sasha asked.

"Yes."

"Aha...Well, Cole, I should be home in about an hour. You know what to do then."

He did. "Yes."

"Cool. FYI, the name doesn't interest me. The story behind it does," she said. "You got me?"

"I do."

"K, later." She hung up.

Six pairs of eyes bore into him.

"What was that about?" Kingston asked.

"Your sister's way of telling me I have some explaining to do," Niko said.

"She doesn't know?" Elina looked even smaller standing next to Kingston's bulk. He'd placed her hand in the crook of his arm.

Niko grimaced at Elina's question. "Unfortunately for me, no."

"Hmm, I almost feel sorry for you." Kingston grinned. "Almost." He turned away with Elina, who waved goodbye behind her back.

Maysin took his phone from Niko. "Where you off to now?"

"I've been summoned to Sasha's place," Niko said. "I might not surface for a fortnight."

"Good!" Maysin slapped him on the back. "And think about moving into your own place now."

"Are you kicking me out?" Niko shot a look at his friend. Since he got back from Harper Royce's house, Maysin had been more reserved than before.

"Damn straight, time to branch out. You've got a woman now."

Niko smiled. "I hear you, partner. What about Justice, have you heard from him?"

"Yeah, he's on his way back." Maysin handed Niko his car keys. "Here, take my car."

"How will you get home?" They'd arrived in Maysin's Mustang.

Maysin shrugged. "I'm staying here for a while, maybe I'll get lucky and a woman will take me home. If not, I'll take a cab."

Niko looked from the keys in his hand to his friend. "Alright." He gave Maysin a bear hug and headed out.

To Sasha.

* * * *

Sasha sat on the ground with her legs tucked under her. Prickly grass scratched the exposed skin on the underside of her thighs. Tiny bugs crawled on her arms and buzzed in her ear. Fireflies punctuated the still darkness with their light. The smell of freshly dug earth filled her nostrils.

Other than that, this really was a peaceful place.

The moon emerged from behind a cloud and cast its silver-blue glow on the gravestone in front of her. *Terry Garraway. Mentor and friend. Beloved and missed forever.*

She placed the single long stemmed white rose next to the gravestone. For a while she only stared at the grave. Bittersweet memories tugged a smile to her lips. Finally, dry-eyed, she spoke.

"I don't know if you're watching or not, but something tells me you are. You should know I loved you as much as I was capable of at the time. I wasn't being myself fully with you and I wasn't happy. I'm sorry I wasn't more open about it."

She took a breath.

"I'm happy now. Niko makes me happy. I'll be spending the rest of my life with him. So just a heads up when we show up there together, no shit better pop off. I'll be fighting on his side and you know I fight dirty.

"I'm sorry Niko turned out to be the one who hurt you, but I can't change it. Is it wrong to love him because of that?" She sniffed. "I don't care. I love him in spite of it. He knows the real me and he loves me, so I have no choice but to love him back."

She scrambled to her feet, dusted off her skin and clothes. "The Gang is no more. Everyone has moved on with their lives. I was the only one living in the past, with you. That changes tonight. I'm selling the condo.

"Kingston thinks you'd want me to be happy, that you'd be proud of me. I hope so, but I don't need your blessing. I already have mine." She blew the gravestone a kiss. "Goodbye, Terry." With that, she pivoted and walked out the cemetery. She didn't look back.

Niko waited.

CHAPTER 26

She managed a quick shower to wash the remnants of the cemetery off her skin. Niko still hadn't made an appearance by the time she'd gotten dressed in a pair of jean shorts and a coral-colored tank. Sasha sat on the couch in her living room and applied lotion to her arms and legs while trepidation worked its way through her insides.

Love. Commitment. Niko.

Those three words together sounded foreign, yet so good, to her. She could love her linebacker without reservations, without fear. No more hiding and it made all the difference. Her thumping heart slowed to a more sedate rhythm. With Niko by her side, she'd be fine. They'd both be all right.

The door knob rattled. Her eyes swung in its direction. Hadn't that fucker heard of doorbells? She grabbed the .22 off the seat next to her and pointed it at the door. Sprawled out, she waited.

Metal scraped against her keyhole. No, the idiot wasn't picking her lock! A grin split her face. She had something for his ass.

The door eased open and his gorgeous copper head poked through. Then his body.

She cocked the gun.

Niko froze. His gaze clashed with hers.

"We've got to stop meeting like this."

"I'm all for that." He kicked the door shut behind him.

She motioned him to her. In two long strides, he stood in front the couch. Her eyes devoured him. She started at his tan Timbos and up his black pants, to his black T-shirt and motorcycle jacket. Sasha continued up until their eyes clashed.

"Ever heard of knocking?" she asked, breathless.

"I thought you'd appreciate my entrance." His lips curved up at the corners.

And she did. She appreciated so much.

Sasha kept looking at him. He stared back with flames leaping in his eyes. Finally, he broke away. His gaze slid down her body like the most expensive silk. Goosebumps broke out on her skin. Her nipples beaded.

Heated moisture poured out of her pussy and soaked the crotch of her shorts. The sedate beat of her heart was now a steady clip. The fine hairs on her skin stood up under his perusal. She whimpered and crossed her legs. His eyes retraced their path.

They were back to staring at each other.

He spoke loudly without saying a word. All he felt was etched in the taut lines of his face, in the proud set of his jaw. The intensity of his love shone brilliantly in his honey-brown gaze. His body, magnificently carved, promised fire and sensual fulfillment of fantasies she'd yet to dream up.

Sasha opened herself to him in that moment. There would no questions about the way she felt for him, not ever. She put everything she wanted, everything she felt in her eyes. His gaze blackened. Niko dropped to his knees before her.

He grabbed her around the waist, pulled her toward him. Sasha widened her thighs and wrapped them around his back. Her hand caressed his smooth head as he stared up at her with wonder in his eyes. Her eyes burned with tears.

"You love me," he said. The words rumbled from his chest.

She grinned. "And you love me." A tear trekked down her cheek. He brushed it away with a thumb. His hand shook against her face. She trapped it under her palm.

"Where's my kiss then?" He smiled up at her.

"Why is it your kiss?" She huffed and leaned down. "Already I'm the one doing all the work in this relationship." She fused their lips together. Niko growled and grabbed her hair. She shivered. She opened her mouth and his sleek tongue slid inside. Their tongues swirled around each other.

Sasha moaned. Back in his arms where she belonged, it felt like she'd never left.

Her pussy ached in need. She used the hold of her legs around him to scoot closer to the edge of the couch. Niko reached up and palmed a breast. He twisted her sensitive nipple and swallowed her cry. Her core pulsed with the pleasure-pain. The tight shorts rubbed against her clit and Sasha rolled her hips.

Friction. She needed some sweet friction, a bit of pressure on her clit, and she'd be coming so good.

"Niko, make me come," she begged against his lips.

He licked the roof of her mouth. His hand left her breasts and fumbled with the fastening on her shorts. She unhooked her legs from around him and drew back. Their fingers fought the stubborn button until, finally, it came undone.

Niko tugged it down her legs and tossed it aside.

"First thing tomorrow, I'm burning everything in your closet that isn't a skirt or a dress," he growled.

She giggled and cradled his head to her tummy. He smoothed his hand down her sides and dropped tiny kisses on her stomach. Her muscles contracted, nails dug into the couch cushions.

"Niko, I'm dying here," she moaned. Her head thrashed from side to side. This wasn't the time for foreplay. "I need

to come, now!"

He chuckled and sat back on his haunches. He widened her legs and brought a finger to her mouth. "Open."

Obediently, she did. His digit slipped inside. Sasha closed her eyes, flicked her tongue over the rough pad of his finger. She felt him tense, heard his sharp intake of breath. Closing her mouth around him, she sucked harder.

"Enough!" Niko popped his finger out of her mouth and she opened her eyes. His nostrils flared and his gaze glowed with a million flames. He licked the finger she'd been sucking on and pressed it against her clit.

"Aargh!" Her hip jerked forward. Her nerve endings, on a slow burn before, sizzled.

"Is this what you wanted?" Niko pressed harder.

"Yess. Fuck!" Sasha rolled her hips. He clamped down on her hips to hold her still while his finger slid away from her clit and down her labia.

Sasha squeezed her eyes shut. He stopped at the entrance of her weeping pussy, his finger poised out of reach. She lifted her hips, but his finger slid away. A sob caught in her throat.

"Niko, you —"

He plunged his finger inside her melting core.

"God!" She hissed.

"More?"

"Fuck, yes!" Sparks danced up and down her spine. Sweat coated her forehead and chest and her heart thumped in her chest. She smiled at Niko through the curtain of her lashes.

He winked and plunged two fingers into her.

Sasha's body bowed. Her grip on the cushions loosened. Her pussy muscles contracted around Niko's torturous fingers.

"Damn," he murmured in a hoarse voice.

Damn, indeed. Sasha lifted her hips and spread her legs as wide as they could possibly go. Niko pulled his fingers out and rammed them back in, again and again.

Her head bounced on the back of the couch and her tits jiggled. His thumb pressed on her clit. The breath hiccupped in Sasha's throat.

"You wanted to come," Niko whispered. His eyes glinted. A muscle leaped in his jaw. He hooked the fingers inside her. They scraped against her walls, sent pinpricks of lightning shooting through her veins. "Come for me." His other hand pinched her clit. The fingers inside her pushed against her G-spot.

"Oh, God. Niko!" She screamed. Contractions rolled through her, shook her body as she spasmed. A kaleidoscope of color burst behind her closed eyelids. Her heart hammered in her ears. The force of her climax made her legs vibrate. Drained and weak, her head lolled to the side on the cushioned back of the couch. Blindly, she reached for him. Their hands met. Fingers twined around each other. She brought his cum-soaked fingers to her lips and licked.

Niko moved and she opened her eyes. On his feet, he leaned over and kissed her on the mouth. Sasha offered him one of his fingers. He took it with a smile. They alternated between sucking her cream off his fingers and sucking each other's tongue.

"Hmm," he hummed. "Tastes like..."

"Peaches," she sang.

"I could eat a peach for hours." He chuckled against her lips.

"That's all good, but I need you inside me right now." She reached for the string on his cargo pants, but he batted her hand away.

"I can't." He straightened. His huge boner, visible in his

pants, pointed in her direction.

Sasha sat up and pursed her lips. "Okay, those two words need to be stricken from your vocabulary where I'm concerned. They give me a rash." She grabbed the waist of his pants and dragged him forward.

"Ole boy here is hungry." His straining cock leaped under her not so gentle touch. Niko's heat scorched her through the material of his pants.

"Not now, Sasha," he croaked. He tugged on her hair, but she shook him off.

She yanked up his T-shirt and flattened her tongue against the contoured hardness of his belly. His muscles contracted and air whistled between his teeth.

"Babe."

The strangled word made her shiver. She nipped at Niko's stomach and traced the outline of his left hip with her tongue.

"Fuck!" He spun away from her and almost ran to the other side of the room.

She folded her arms across her chest and narrowed her eyes at him.

He held up a trembling hand. "'As much as I'd like to, babe, we can't right now."

"Why the hell not?"

"We have to be somewhere." His chest heaved and he took a deep breath. "Go pack an overnight bag."

"What?" She stood up. "Where are you taking me that can't wait?"

"We have a lot to discuss, Sasha." He walked back over and cupped her chin. "There are some things you need to know, things long overdue." His eyes bored into her.

"Like what?" Yum, she could stare into his eyes forever.

"Like why Elina called me Cole?"

She blinked. "Oh, that pesky little detail."

"Yes." His thumb caressed her jaw line. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, but I'll tell you everything as soon as we get to where we're going."

"And where is that?"

"Not far from here, so hurry."

"Fine." She headed to her bedroom, but turned around at the archway. "Hey."

He looked up from straightening the couch.

"Did you hate me for even a little bit when I left you in the cabin?" She held her breath.

His eyes softened. "I can never hate you, babe. I know why you felt you had to leave and I think if we'd waited for me to let you go..." Flames leapt in his gaze. "I'd never do it." His voice held a warning.

Her trembling lips curved into a smile. "You love me."

"And you love me."

CHAPTER 27

Niko's cock throbbed a painful beat against his thigh. He gritted his teeth and tightened his hold on the steering wheel. Why didn't he follow the demands of his body, and Sasha, and sink into her welcoming heat?

He licked his lips at the remembered sweetness of her. So juicy. Damn.

Sasha sat next to him in the vehicle with her smooth legs crossed. She'd pulled on a denim skirt that barely passed for a wide belt and the gold heels she'd been wearing at the club.

"Do you own anything without heels?"

She turned to him with a finger on her chin. "Would you like to see me in something without heels?"

"Fuck no." His cock head pushed against the zippered front of his pants.

"Hmm." She shifted in her seat.

The cool breeze from the open windows brought the scent of her arousal to his nose. Niko's nostrils flared. His knuckles whitened from his death grip on the steering wheel.

"Is something wrong, dear?" she asked in the softest voice he'd ever heard.

"Are you wearing underwear?" His rough voice sounded foreign to his ears.

Sasha shifted in her seat to face him. "Should I be wearing

any?"

"Don't play with me, Sasha, or I swear."

"Ooh, I know." She raised a hand and bounced up and down in her seat. "You'll pull over and fuck me doggy-style on the side of the road? Pretty please?" Her voice held a hint of a plea.

He chuckled and turned into the circular driveway of a modern-styled house. She sat up and straightened her clothes.

"Whose house is this?" She peered out the window.

Niko parked the car in silence. He got out of the car and walked around to open her door.

She shook her head. "I'm not budging until you tell me whose house this is."

He sighed in exasperation and held up the keys he'd taken out of his pocket. "It's mine, and therefore, yours. Happy now?"

"I have a house?" She grabbed the keys and jumped out the SUV. His Pink Lady was a blur as she raced to the front door, in those heels no less.

A small smile played on his lips—she could probably do a five mile sprint in those weapons. He slammed the car door closed and caught up with her at the door, but she'd already unlocked it.

She pushed the door open and a blaring sound went off. "Shit."

"Alarm." Niko flipped on the light switch behind her.

Sasha pulled a hair pin out of her hair and scrutinized the alarm's key pad. "Okay, I know this model. Will showed me how to disable one like it on a job last year. We have five minutes before the cops show up." With a few jabs of the pin, the loud noise disappeared.

"Babe."

"Hmm?"

"This is our house. I know the alarm code." Niko tried not to laugh.

"My bad." She turned and waved a hand behind her. "Well then, do your thing."

He snickered and dropped a kiss on her lips before he punched in the code.

"Oh, my God!"

Niko started. "What?"

She walked slowly into the living room area with her eyes wide. Her heels clacked on the polished hardwood floor.

"You live here?" She spun in a circle, amazement shining on her face.

"No." He dropped the keys in the bowl by the door and made his way to her. Sasha frowned at his reply and he rushed to clarify. "I own it, but I've never lived in it."

He'd bought the rundown building and worked hard to restore it, using the hard labor to take his mind off Vicente and his injuries. When it was all done, he couldn't bear to set foot in it.

He motioned for her to take a seat at the couch he'd had brought in earlier that day. She did, but he couldn't stay still so he paced the floor.

"When do I get the grand tour?" Sasha kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet up under her.

Niko paused in front of the fireplace. "We're not moving from this spot, until I say what I need to."

"Fine." She waited expectantly.

Niko clasped his hands behind his back, then brought them to the front and shoved them into his pockets. He couldn't get comfortable. His heart raced and his palm itched. He swallowed.

"I was born Cole Langley."

"So why the name change?" Sasha's gaze sharpened on his face.

"Three years ago, Cole died in a car crash."

"What?" Sasha jumped to her feet.

"That's what the official report states." Niko squeezed his eyes shut against the bombardment of memories. He'd never spoken of that time in his life, not even with Maysin and Justice. Even now he could still smell the scent of smoke, feel the intense heat licking his skin. Sasha needed to know this. For her, he'd go through it again.

"What does the unofficial report say?" she asked from behind him.

Niko choked back a humorless chuckle. "There's no unofficial report, but if one did exist it would say Johan Vicente trapped Cole Langley in a burning car and sent it over a cliff."

"Why?" Sasha wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned on his back.

Now came the hardest part, the part he couldn't even put into words in the cabin. He grabbed her wrists and turned to face her. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. For him.

"I got his daughter pregnant."

Shock froze her expression in place. Her mouth worked, but no sounds came out. One of her hands went to her midsection and she doubled over.

"No, babe, he killed it. Vicente killed my baby." It was the first time he'd said those words. A tear leaked out of the corner of his eyes. Sasha let out a horrified gasp and crumbled to the floor. Niko knelt and scooped her up. He brought her to the couch and sat down with her in his lap.

Sasha wiped his eyes with her thumb while hers tears flowed freely. "Did you kill him?" Her tone was as casual as if she asked what day it was.

"I wished I'd gotten to him first, but no." He shook his head, then kissed the salty trail on her cheek. She shifted until her head lay in his lap and her feet hung over the side

of the couch.

"Start from the beginning."

"The beginning." Niko wiped a palm over his mouth. "I went to live with my aunt after my parents died. I rebelled, a lot, and eventually fell into the streets. I joined a gang that was led by one of Vicente's brothers. One day he came by and saw me. He liked my attitude, my loyalty to the gang, so he wanted me to work for him."

"At first I was his bodyguard, but one day I neutralized a threat to him and suddenly I was killing people exclusively on his command." His fingers tangled in her hair and massaged her scalp. "I'd never killed before I met him. I fought and I robbed, but never anything like what he wanted me to do."

"Why did you continue to do it?"

He glanced down her beautiful face. "He called me his son. His other men were jealous of me, because I had his ear when they didn't. I was still wet behind the ears, but he'd ask my opinion before anyone else's." His lips curved in a self-deprecating smile. "I loved that illusion of power and belonging somewhere. To keep it I had to follow orders."

"And that changed when you got with Elina."

He nodded. "I never looked at Elina in a romantic way. She was the boss's daughter who barely spoke and spooked easily. In the company of others, Vicente appeared the doting dad, but in private he terrorized her." Much later she'd confess the physical and mental abuse she suffered at her father's hand.

"When his abuse became too much, she turned to drastic measures. One night, she got me drunk, seduced me and got pregnant."

"But..." Sasha sat up. "In the cabin you made it seem like you'd had a love affair or something like that."

"We tried after I found out about the baby. I loved her,

but as the mother of my child who needed to be protected from a monster."

"She counted on you being a good guy to take her away from him." She returned her head to his lap.

"Yeah well, a lot of good that did. I confronted Vicente after she confessed the beatings and mind games he played on her. I told him she carried my child and he'd never hurt her again."

"Sounds like my man." She smiled up at him. "How'd he take it?"

"Calm and composed."

"No! Really?"

"Yes." He shook his head at the remembered chill that coursed through his body then. "My gut knew it couldn't be that easy, but I needed to believe he cared deep down about a grandchild. When he told his men to let us leave, I felt justified I wasn't so far off the mark about the man I considered my father."

Sasha caressed his cheek. "But..."

"Three days later I came home to the apartment we shared to find Elina writhing on the floor. Screaming. Bleeding." He shuddered. So much blood everywhere. Elina's gut-wrenching screams still echoed in his head.

"She'd gone over to her father's because he told us he'd bought some stuff for the baby." Grief choked him. He cleared his throat and continued. "I couldn't go with her because I had to find a job. He put something in the lemonade to induce labor, then invited her to sit and drink.

"She lost the baby that night. I brought her to the hospital and was heading to him when they ambushed me." His gaze left Sasha's face and drifted to somewhere over the fireplace. "I stayed chained to a radiator in a basement for two nights without food or water. The third night they put me in the car and set it ablaze."

Sasha scrambled upright and sat astride him. Her arms wrapped tightly around him and she buried her wet face in the crook of his neck. Niko squeezed her close as her muffled sobs tore at his heart.

"The burning car fell off a cliff. I don't know how I survived, but I was fished out of the water the next day. I was in a coma, but my face and body had been barely touched by the fire. No one came looking for me."

"So Cole died and Niko was born."

"Yes. The idea came to me while I listened in on the nurses' conversations about me. They speculated as to who I was, where I'd come from. When I finally let them know I was awake, I had my name and story ready."

"How long were you in the coma?"

"Three months. A week after Niko Davaris opened his eyes, Maysin and Justice showed up. I didn't know them, but they had beef with Vicente and wanted to get even. I was all for that.

"I had plastic surgery on my face, and left the hospital with revenge on my mind. We waited patiently for three years. When we heard Harper Royce had started snooping, I allowed it because I knew I'd get what I needed from her."

"Why did you need the drive? And how did you even find out about it?"

He shrugged. "We bugged her house and phones and installed cameras. The drive was leverage. I wanted him to come to the person who held his life in their hands, only then did I plan to reveal who I truly was."

Sasha drew back and met his eyes. "Instead crazy ole me derailed everything."

"You had your plans as well and I'm glad they went off without a hitch." He cupped her cheek. "From the instant I saw you in my room, revenge took a backseat. It was all about you, with your pink guns and your hold on my heart."

He kissed her soft lips in reverence.

"How long ago did you have this house?" she asked against his lips.

"I bought it three years ago, but it's been completed for about a year. Why?"

"Did you buy it for Elina?" Her gaze drifted to the ceiling.

"What? No, I bought it after I got out of the hospital. I fixed all up myself, which is why it took so long. Why would you ask that?" Did she really think he'd bring her somewhere he'd designated for someone else?

"It's just..." Her gaze came back to him. "Why would you have this beautiful place and not want to be here?"

Niko sighed. "I worked on the house while making plans for revenge. Those plans kept me company. When the house finished, it felt so empty I didn't want to be here alone so I crashed at Maysin or J's." He laced their fingers and brought it to his lips. "Now I have you, I don't see an empty house, I see possibilities. I can't imagine anyone else being by my side, in my bed, when I spend my first night here."

"God, you say the sweetest shit." She dropped kisses on his lips.

He smiled against her lips. "How come you're friends with Elina?"

"Are you kidding?" She scooted off his lap. "She needs taking care off. I took one look at her and I knew she was miserable. She's too pale, too thin. I couldn't understand how you'd leave and not take her with you after you told me you loved her."

"I couldn't make contact with her. I tried once, but she was under constant guard, I couldn't take the chance." He'd worried so much for her. "I agree we need to protect her, whoever killed her father might be a threat to her. We've got to find out who did it."

"How will we find out?"

"Maysin has people working on it. We'll figure it out, trust me." He tucked her securely to his side. He was never letting her out of his sight. "How come you're so cool about me spending time with Elina? Most women wouldn't be."

She snorted. "You should know by now, I'm not most women. Besides, if there's one thing I'm sure of, it's you." She smiled up at him. "Elina needs to know there are decent people out there she can count on."

He leaned over and kissed her. "You're my heart, you know that?"

"I do and you're mine. Speaking of which..." She drew back. "What do you do for money?"

He laughed. "Rather late for that question, isn't it?"

"Humor me."

"I did this." He gestured at the room at large. "I liked it, so I started a company. Loce Construction. It's small, but growing, plus I've got money from my not-so-savory days stashed away. Your man's worth a pretty penny, we'll never have to worry about money."

"Uh-huh."

"What about you?" He grinned. "What keeps you in frilly pink panties and weaponized stilettos?"

"I have an unsavory past, too, remember?" She stood and straightened her clothes. "I've got a few dollars saved up, plus the club is jumping. Literally. Your babe's worth a pretty penny herself."

He chuckled. "I think I'd like to be a kept man."

"Yeah?" She cocked an eyebrow. "That makes two of us. Now, come give me a tour of my house. Start with the bedroom." She turned and headed up the winding staircase.

Niko raced after her.

CHAPTER 28

Sasha stood against the balcony outside the master bedroom and stared out at the view of downtown Seattle in the distance. A mild breeze rustled her hair and created tiny waves in the infinity swimming pool below her location.

She had a house. Well, Niko had a house. *Po-tay-to, po-tah-to*. What a job he'd done fixing up the three-bedroom house. High ceilings, hardwood floors. The entire fourth wall overlooking the pool, and gorgeous views of the city, was one-way glass. Niko confessed he'd had the state of the art appliances installed only hours earlier. He'd wanted her to feel at home so he'd stocked the fridge—a proper one—full of ice cream, waffles and bacon.

He had her at ice cream. She turned and walked back into the bedroom. Her bare feet sunk into the tan wool carpet. The entire house was a modern mix of whites, beiges and tans. She sat at the edge of the large sleigh bed and pulled of her skirt and top. Niko had only gone downstairs to answer a phone call from Maysin and get her overnight bag from the car, but he was taking forever. He'd better hurry or she'd start without him.

Naked, she crawled beneath the cool, crisp white sheets. She arranged the sheet so it wrapped around her waist and dipped between her legs, but left everything else exposed. With one leg lying flat, the other bent at the knee, she waited.

A girl could get used to shit like this.

"Babe?" The front door slammed.

"Up here," she yelled back.

His footsteps echoed on the stairs. "The guys are gonna come over tomorrow to—" He halted in the doorway.

"See something you like, Browning?" She twirled a lock of hair around a finger and parted her thighs.

"Lots of somethings," he said. His gaze stayed on her as he chucked off his clothes. The muscles in his arms flexed, his tattoos writhed and his proud cock bobbed and weaved.

Sasha's tongue traced her lower lip. Yum was the word that rushed to mind whenever she saw her man naked.

Niko walked to the side of the bed with his cock in his hand. He stood and looked down at her, but she only had eyes for the hard length in his palm. His thumb swiped over the purple mushroom tip. She drooled.

"How do you want this?" His husky voice spiked her blood pressure.

Sasha wrapped her hand around the hand holding his delectable magic stick. "Oh, you know how I take my shit, straight up, no chaser." She urged his hips closer and closed her mouth on the tip of him.

"Ah, gad!" His hips bucked.

She chuckled around the pulsing organ on her tongue. Teach him to make her wait. Niko grabbed the headboard with one hand, the fingers on the other twisted in her hair as he surged into her hungry mouth. Sasha hollowed her cheeks, sucked him in deeper. Sweet pre-cum slid down her throat and melted into her bloodstream.

She moaned. Cream poured out of her contracting cunt, ran down her ass and dripped onto the sheet below her. Her hips swiveled, lifted in readiness.

The tip of her tongue dipped into the slit on Niko's cock. He grunted above her head. His fingers left her head and

reappeared to fling away the sheet at her waist.

"Ummm." She groaned around his pulsing length. Her thighs widened, hips undulated.

Niko bowed at the waist. The movement pulled him away from her so she dug her nails into his hip. He hissed and sunk two fingers into her pussy.

A scream gurgled in her throat, muffled by the nine inches of thick meat stuffed down her windpipe. Her tongue swiped at the velvet smoothness of him while his fingers plunged in and out of her tight cunt.

The hand at his hip slid around to sink into the globes of his taut ass. He jerked.

"Motherfuck!" He thrust faster. Her ride on his fingers sped up. Niko pulled them out and rammed three back in.

She released his cock and screamed. Pain and pleasure chased each other all over her nerve endings. He gave a dry chuckle and kept ramming the three digits into her.

"Yes, let me hear it," he murmured. "I want those screams, babe."

Tension tightened Sasha's muscles. Her head fell back. She squeezed her eyes shut. The sharp spark of a climax started at the base of her spine.

"Ungh, Niko, I'm coming." She tore at the sheet with her nails.

"Oh, no you're not," Niko growled. He yanked his fingers out.

Her eyes flew open. "No!" Sasha's hips fucked the air. Her pussy contracted, body shook. Niko stepped away from her. She gave him the evil eye and dipped a hand between her legs.

"Don't." The force behind the word froze her fingers.

"Niko, you can't just —"

Green-gold flames danced in his intense gaze. "Get on your stomach." He motioned with his chin while his wrist

jerked his rigid length.

Sasha flipped over with a quickness and buried her face in the pillows. Adrenaline and the need to come created a haze over her eyes.

"On your knees, ass in the air," came the grating command.

She obeyed like the hungry little slut she was. On her knees, she buried her face in the pillows and waited. His muted footsteps drew closer. The mattress dipped under his weight, her pulse did the stutter-gallop thing it did around Niko.

"Hold yourself open for me." His warm breath kissed the base of her spine.

Mother of—he wanted to torture her! Her teeth sunk into her lower lip as she reached behind her and pulled her ass cheeks apart. A low rumble sounded from behind her.

Sasha shivered and waited for his next move.

* * * *

Niko positioned himself on his knees behind Sasha. The beauty of her pink hole hypnotized him. He leaned down and blew against the glistening folds. She gasped. The tiny entrance opened and closed rapidly. He put his nose to her and dragged her essence into his lungs.

Ah, fuck! Pre-cum dripped off the tip of his engorged cock. *There is nobody like my Sasha.* Her fingers flexed on her plump flesh. Nails—each a different shade of pink—left half-moons on her smooth skin. He made a mental note to himself to kiss them away later.

"Niko, please," she whispered above him.

Please what? Fuck her? Make her come? His duty was to please her, and he would. He brushed her hands away from her ass, took their place with his. He dipped his head and

dragged his tongue down her moist slit. Peach syrup tantalized his taste buds. Her body shook and her unique arousal scented the air. He sunk his fingers into the globes of her ass and speared her hole with his tongue.

"Oh God. Oh God," she chanted.

Not God. Niko.

He licked an index finger and dipped it into her dripping cunt, before he screwed into her ass. Sasha bucked. Violent tremors wracked her body. Niko dropped a kiss on the base of her spine.

"Relax, babe. Let me love you right."

"You're killing me," she whimpered.

"But what away to go, hmm?" A strained chuckle escaped from him. Her dark rosette opened under his persistent finger and Niko pushed inside slowly. The muscles here, tighter than her pussy, clamped down painfully at the intrusion. A tug on his finger echoed on his cock. He closed his eyes against the urge to slam into her now. It would taste so much sweeter when he sank into her silken heat.

His mouth settled over the sticky folds of her cunt. Drizzled honey melted on his tongue. He growled and stabbed at her hole with his tongue.

"Fuck!" Her legs wobbled. With his right index in her ass and his mouth on her pussy, Niko used his left hand to wrap around her waist. Her contracting anus allowed his finger to slide in to the last knuckle, so he wiggled it around. Hot liquid dripped into his mouth. He lapped it up. He positioned his mouth directly over the opening of her cunt and sucked.

Sasha yelped and pitched forward on her stomach. Niko went with her. The movement dislodged his finger from her ass, but he barely noticed. He grabbed her ass cheeks, buried his face in her soft, wet cunt. Her hips jerked. Their ragged breathing, coupled with the sucking noises he made, echoed

in the room. He felt her body tense, climax imminent. One last flick of his tongue on her clit, then he released her.

"No!" she screamed back at him. "Fucker, I'll kill you for this." Her hips rotated in the air.

He smacked her clit. She cried out, but arched her back, sending her ass higher, opening her pussy wider. He aligned his neglected cock with her wet entrance, grasped her hips. In one surge forward, he buried himself to the balls in her.

"Yess," she hissed, "that's the shit."

He shuddered. Fucking A. Her cunt massaged his cock with tight contractions, bathed it in creamy liquid heat. He squeezed his eyes shut and bit the inside of his cheek. Pinpricks of fire raced up his legs and gathered in his balls.

"Babe." His balls tucked up under his cock and he gritted his teeth against the pressure.

"Face to face," Sasha cried. "Don't come yet, Niko." She reached back and grabbed his hip, stalling his movements.

"Sasha," he growled.

She looked over her shoulder. Sweat dripped off her forehead. "I'm turning around, so don't fucking move."

He held still, barely, as she lifted her right leg up over his shoulder and dropped it on his left side. Her right hand dropped onto the mattress behind her and she used it for balance. By slow degrees, she shifted the right side of her body until it faced up. The movement sent a corkscrew effect spiraling over his cock. He groaned, gritted his teeth. Sweat trickled down his spine. Sasha balanced on her arms until she'd positioned herself on her back.

She stared up at him with glistening eyes. "As you were, soldier."

"You're nuts, woman." He surged into her.

"Damn straight." Her eyelids fluttered. "Now make me come, for fuck's sake!"

Niko lifted her right leg onto his shoulder. She wrapped

the left around his waist and raised her hips. He slammed into her. Her tits bounced. He pulled out and slammed in again. Her silk walls wrapped around him, held his aching cock in a vice grip.

His breath whistled out between clenched teeth. Dropping her leg, he lowered himself on his elbows. Their fingers found each other, linked as he claimed her lips. He stared into almond-shaped eyes brimming with love. Bright and bold, like the woman in his arms. Emotion clogged his chest. He rolled his hips. His pelvis bumped hers.

Sasha tightened her legs round his waist, lifted her lower half off the bed. Her muscles clenched and unclenched around him. He sunk his teeth into her lower lip. She smiled. Niko angled his hip to the left and thrust. Her muscles fluttered, her fingers squeezed his. Breath hitched. He deepened the kiss, sucked her tongue into his mouth. Thrust again, harder. The head of his cock knocked her G-spot. He broke off the kiss and stared down at her.

The lithe body below him tensed. She screamed.

That fucking scream, like music to my ears. All thoughts evaporated from his brain. Every drop of blood in his body concentrated in his balls. Sasha's walls clutched him. The sparks in his bloodstream ignited into a sweet-as-fuck bonfire. Niko threw his head back and howled. He kept thrusting until he emptied himself, all he had, into her.

When their bodies finished quaking, he rolled to the side, still secured in her pussy's chokehold, and brought her with him. She sighed and tucked her chin in the crook of his neck. Niko held her in a tight embrace.

He kissed her forehead. "You good?"

"Fuck, I've never been better," she replied with a kiss on his neck. Exhaustion colored her words.

He chuckled and pulled the covers up and over them. Sleep beat at him, too. She shifted and her pussy massaged

his not-so-flaccid length.

Damn.

"You love me," she whispered in his ear.

"You love me, too."

CHAPTER 29

A warm, wet mouth closed over her left nipple. Sasha stretched her hands over her head. Her legs rustled the sheets. A sleepy smile hovered over her lips.

"Rise and shine, Pink Lady."

She opened her eyes. Sunlight bathed the bedroom in a golden hue and glinted off Niko's head. He lay half-on, half-off her body and regarded her with smiling eyes.

"What time is it?"

"Almost noon. King's been ringing your phone off the hook and Maysin and J are headed over here."

"Argh!" She sat up, looked around. "Where's my phone?"

He picked up her cell from the bedside table and handed it to her. She checked her messages. Kingston left a voicemail asking if she was okay and Elina left a text saying she'd be at Sasha's place at noon. She'd be bringing food.

Sasha's stomach rumbled. "What's the address here?"

He told her as she texted it to Elina. "Elina's going to be coming over in a bit," she told Niko.

"Kay." He shrugged and blew her nipple.

"Hmm. Uh, Niko, call Maysin. Tell him bring food."

"Why? We have food downstairs." He sucked her nipple into his mouth.

"Ah..." She arched her back, groped his shoulder. "I know we have food. I just don't feel like cooking."

"I'll do it."

"Maybe later. Right now I need you for more important matters." She widened her legs.

He climbed on top of her and kissed her nose. "Your wish is my command."

"Good." She held up her phone. "Call Maysin."

He grinned and dialed Maysin. "Yeah, it's me. My woman has requested you bring us food. Do as she asks." He hung up and dropped the phone on the bed "Now where was I?"

She grabbed his hand and brought it to the juncture of her thighs. "You were about to tell me good morning."

"Oh, yeah." He slid inside her waiting pussy with one smooth surge.

Sasha pulled his head down to her and captured his mouth. Their tongue did battle as she lifted her hips and rocked into his thrusts. She could get used to waking up like this every day.

"Good morning," Niko said.

"Hmm. And a very good morning to you, too."

He bent and captured a nipple between his teeth. She arched into his mouth. His fingers burned into her skin as he grasped her hip and pounded her cunt.

"Ungh, yeah," she groaned.

His teeth sunk into her nipple.

"Fuck!" Next to her, the bed vibrated. Beyonce belted out *Diva*. "Damn it." She groped for the phone while Niko lifted an eyebrow. Tearing her gaze away, she looked at the caller ID. Kingston.

She hit talk. "Yeah."

Niko rubbed a thumb over her clit. She gasped and shuddered.

"Are you okay?" Kingston asked.

"Of course, I'm okay." Her eyes narrowed at Niko. He grinned and pinched her clit. "God!" Her pussy spasmed.

She answered his challenge by squeezing his cock with her inner wall. He grunted and slammed into her.

"Hmm. Damn." Her hungry cunt grabbed at him. She gritted her teeth.

"Sasha? Sasha, are you listening to me?" Kingston asked in her ear.

Fuck, she'd forgotten he was there. "King, I'm busy right now. I'm in Kirkland." She hastily recited the address. "Come over and bring food." She pressed end and flung the phone away.

Niko laughed.

"C'mere." Sasha licked her lips.

He came down on his elbows. She kissed his lips and then sunk her teeth into his bottom lip. "You know what I want, give it to me."

His heated gaze remained on her as he pounded into her pussy. Sasha gripped the sheets and lifted her hips to meet his thrusts. Lightning coursed through her veins. Her toes curled and she arched her back. Niko sunk his teeth into her throat. He pinched her clit and slammed into her. His teeth scraped a hidden something on the side of her throat. She couldn't stop screaming. Couldn't stop coming.

"Ah, fuck," Niko growled and flooded her with his come. He licked the seam of her mouth. Sasha sucked him in. His hips rolled. Her pussy fluttered. The thrusts grew shallow, until he stopped moving and gathered her into his arms.

"We've got to get up soon," he said. "Company will be here any minute."

Right on cue, the doorbell rang.

"Tell them I'm not in." She pulled the covers over her head.

Niko swatted her butt. "I'll get the door, come down when you're ready."

"Thanks." She puckered her lips for a kiss and he gave

her a lingering one. When they drew apart, she waved him away. "Go, I won't be long."

He climbed off the bed and pulled on a red polo shirt and a pair of jeans. She blew him a kiss as he walked out the room. Soon as the door closed behind him, she dragged her well-plowed ass to the bathroom for a shower.

Twenty minutes later, dressed in dark distressed jeans and a green razor-back tank, she tiptoed on bare feet down the carpeted staircase. Loud voices sounded in the kitchen so she headed there. She stood in the doorway to the kitchen and observed Niko and his friends. They laughed and chatted as they removed food from bags on the marble top island.

Maysin's unbound hair hung to the middle of his back. He wore dark jeans and a white shirt with rolled up sleeves. Justice's back was to her as well. She got a nice view of the scratches on the back of his neck and shoulders exposed by his black wife B.

"Well, well, well." She stepped into the room. The three men turned in her direction. "She put a hurting on you, huh?"

Justice frowned like he didn't catch her meaning.

"The scratches on your skin," she said. "I hope you gave as good as you got." She grinned and winked at Maysin. "Waddup, Rick?" She pulled up a stool at the island and sat down. "What's for breakfast?"

The men ignored her and instead barraged Justice with questions.

"You slept with someone?"

"I thought you didn't do that while on the job?"

She fished a croissant out of a clear plastic box and waited. Justice crossed his eyes at her. She shrugged. His eyes promised payback.

"Great. Thanks to you, Nutso, these two will be all up in

my business." Justice scowled at Sasha.

"Hey, don't blame me," she said. "If you wanted to keep your pussy play a secret, you should've covered up those scratches. Or bought her a nail file." She snickered.

Niko and Maysin burst out laughing. Justice lunged at her, but Niko caught him by the back of his neck.

"Watch yourself, J. She packs some serious heat, I wouldn't want to see you get your ass kicked by a girl."

"She's no girl," Justice said.

Sasha stuck out her tongue as the doorbell rang.

* * * *

Elina was the last to arrive. After a rowdy meal, they sat in the living room and watched the news about Johan Vicente. The police still had no suspects. Niko wished he knew who'd killed the bastard, but he wouldn't be losing sleep over it. More important things occupied his time.

Sasha sat cross legged on the floor talking to Elina, while Maysin, Justice and Kingston talked sports. The morning's paper lay on the coffee table. Niko lost count of the many times Maysin glanced at it. Along with Vicente's story another person they knew was on the front page.

Harper Royce. The heading announced her engagement to District Attorney Isaiah Merzier. Niko had never seen his friend look so bleak.

"Niko." Sasha waved at him.

With a smile, he strode over and squatted beside her and Elina. "What's up?"

"Elina's going to rent my condo," Sasha said.

"Really?" He looked from Elina, to Sasha and back. "What's happening with your father's property?"

"It's ill-gotten wealth," Elina said, "I want no part of it. Besides, the authorities might yet seize everything. They

haven't done so yet, but..." She shrugged.

"What will you do for money?" If she needed help getting on her feet, he and Sasha would gladly offer assistance.

A smile lit up Elina's face. "I'm actually going to start working in a daycare center next week. I applied using my mother's last name."

"Good for you." Niko pulled her into a hug. "I'm so glad to see you smiling again."

"I'm glad to finally have reasons to smile." She drew back with tears in her eyes. "I'm glad to have you two in my corner."

"You have all of us." Sasha rubbed Elina's shoulder as her cell went off. She answered on the second ring.

"Hello?" Her eyes lit up. "Really, when? Alright I'll be there with a surprise in tow. Bye, guys."

She ended the call and turned to Niko. "That was the Hughes, they're coming home early from the cruise."

"What's the surprise?" he asked.

She giggled and cupped his cheek. "You, of course."

He grabbed her hand and brought her to her feet. "Excuse us, folks." Niko led Sasha out the side door, onto the patio. "You're surprising your parents with me?"

"Yeah. What's the big deal?" Her eyes narrowed. "You're not nervous, are you?"

"Why—why would I be nervous?" His gaze slid away from her face as he forced a chuckle. Meeting the parents. Man, he'd never had to do that before. Vicente didn't count. What if they didn't like him? How would that affect his relationship with Sasha?

"Hey, look at me." She cupped his jaw. "You're nervous. Why?"

"This is important to both of us," he said. "But what if I mess up?"

Confusion settled over her eyes. "I don't understand.

Mess up how?"

Niko removed her hand from his face with a sigh. He took both her hands in his grasp as he tried to make her see his fears. "What if I make a bad impression, or they don't like or approve of me?"

"Wha—" Sasha's mouth opened and closed rapidly. She took a breath. "Are you saying you think the Hughes' approval, or lack thereof, can make or break us?"

"Not break, but it might hurt us."

"Huh." She pulled out of his grasp and took a step back. "Do you want to know where I went last night after I left the club?"

"Uh, sure." Niko frowned. How was that relevant?

"I went to the cemetery to see Terry."

He blinked.

She nodded. "Yep. I wanted to say the things I never got around to saying when he was alive."

"Like what?"

"Like why I could never commit to him." She crossed her arms across her chest. "I also wanted him to know I'd moved on from the guilt and I didn't need his blessing to be with you."

Niko smiled. She had the determined look in her eyes he'd come to love and be wary of. "Why didn't you need his blessing?"

"I already had the most important one." She took a step toward him. "Mine." She ran her hands up his arms and hooked them around his neck. "No one tells me how to love, or who to love. Our relationship depends on me loving you and you loving me, nothing else. The only one who's supposed to love you is me. I do."

God, he loved her so much. She was right, it's all about them. He wrapped his hands around her tiny waist and hugged her to him. "When did you get so wise?" he

whispered in her ear.

She chuckled. "Since I allowed myself to fall in love." She drew back and met his eyes. "Seriously, you have to know I don't care if the Hughes like you or not. It'll be a bummer, but it won't change anything."

Niko kissed her eyelids, nose and finally murmured against her lips, "I know. I was just playing devil's advocate."

"Well, stop." She smacked him on the shoulder. "They'll love you on principle alone. You're the first guy, ever, I'd be bringing to meet them."

"Why? What about Garraway?"

"They never met him. I never volunteered, he didn't push it." She sighed. "I knew even then I couldn't really love him."

Niko's arms tightened around her. He counted his lucky stars he'd found the woman in his arms. She was fierce, loyal and tough. Also, a tad touched in the head. Exactly the way he liked her. She'd keep him on his toes. They'd never have a dull moment and he couldn't wait. He'd spend the rest of his life showing her how much he loved her, how much he appreciated the beauty that was her.

* * * *

Sasha planted a kiss on Niko's neck and moved out of his arms. "Come on, we gotta go shopping."

"What? Why?"

"I've seen the clothes in your closet." She tsked. "We have to make you presentable." Her lips pursed and she tapped a finger on her chin. "Maybe some long sleeves to cover up those tats. I love them, but they might be a bit much." She turned her back and started to walk away.

"Really?"

Over her shoulder, she watched Niko scrutinize his tattooed arm. "No, dummy." She burst out laughing. "You're too easy."

Niko joined in her laughter. He leaped forward and snagged her around the waist. She leaned into his warm embrace. Her head lolled on his chest while he nuzzled her neck. Sasha closed her eyes with a sigh. No place made her feel more at home than the warmth of Niko's arms.

Her lover and her best friend. She'd hit the jackpot when she found him and she'd never let him go. This was where she belonged. This was who she belonged with. She had a ready clip for anyone who dared say different.

She reached behind her and rubbed Niko's smooth head. "You love me.

"Damn straight." He nipped her ear. "You love me."

"Fucking A."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A Caribbean transplant, Avril now lives in Brooklyn, N.Y with a Spousal Equivalent of almost eight years. Together they raise a 6 y/o daughter who loves reading and school (wonder how long that will last). Avril's earliest memories of reading revolve around discussing plot points of The Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys with an equally book-minded mother.

Always in love with the written word, Avril finally decided to do the writing in August of '09 and never looked back. Spicy love scenes, delicious heroes, and wicked women burn up the pages of Avril's stories, but there'll always be a happy ending; Avril remains a believer of love in all its forms.

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