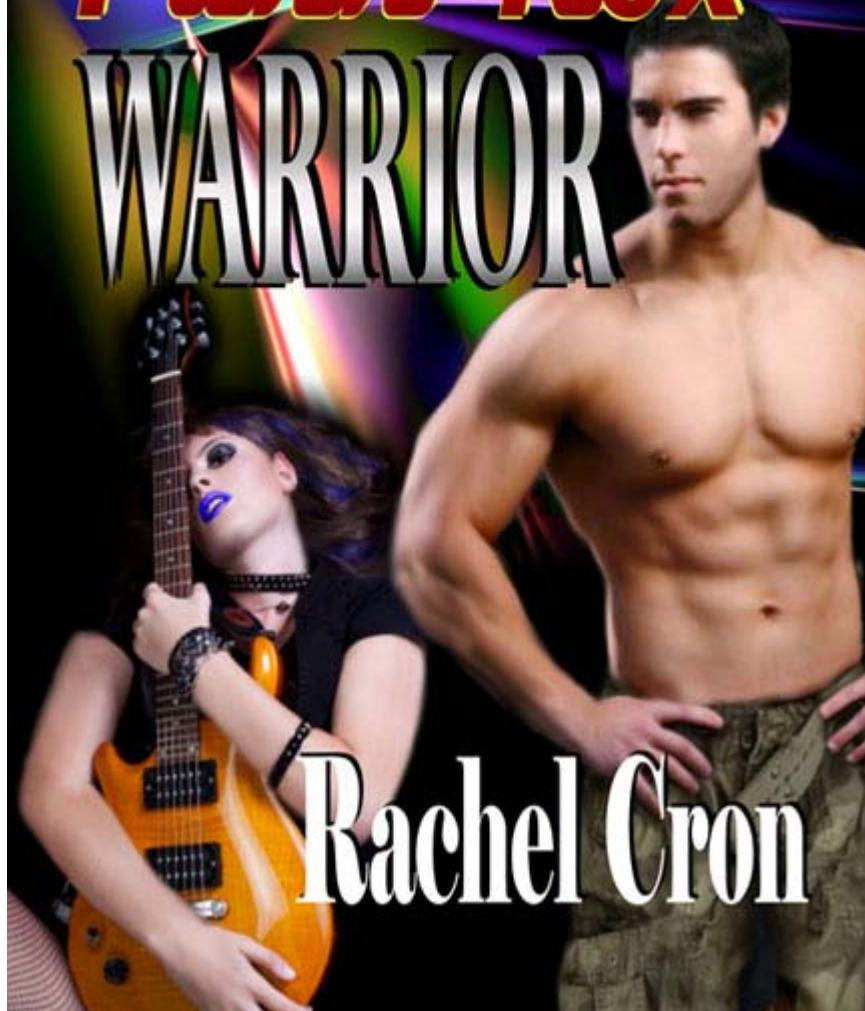


SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*

# *Punk Rox* WARRIOR



# Punk Rox Warrior

Life is about to get interesting for Rainne.

Rainne Stanton is a young woman who lives by her own rules. She has her band, she has her little business, and now she has a stalker. Her world is turned upside down when her mother gets involved.

James Decker is competent, lethal and Rainne's new shadow. Hired by her mother to find and eliminate Rainne's stalker, he never anticipated what was waiting for him.

Their passion was something neither one expected or welcomed.

Together, can they clear the haze of deception surrounding Rainne? As James begins to unravel the mystery that is Rainne herself, what he finds will forever change him in ways he never could have anticipated.

*This book contains anal sex.*

**Genre:** Contemporary

**Length:** 46,210 words

# **PUNK ROX WARRIOR**

**Rachel Cron**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**  
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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

**PUNK ROX WARRIOR**

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# DEDICATION

For Jim, till the mountains crumble and the trees burn, I will always be your kitten. To my children (Phish n Ducky) who are the catalyst for everything I do and every breath I take.

Thank you to my parents for always standing behind me and never blocking my chosen path.

Suzie Q and Thing 2, I could not have asked for two better friends and for all the other people in my life who make the mayhem bearable.

Last but most definitely not least, to everyone who isn't afraid to bask in their own light. Shine on people, shine on.

# PUNK ROX WARRIOR

RACHEL CRON

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## Chapter 1

“You did what?” Rainne shrieked while pacing violently back and forth in her cluttered studio apartment. This was not the way she wanted to start her morning. She hadn’t even finished her second cup of coffee yet. “This is ridiculous! I’m not a child! I don’t need a babysitter!”

“Well, obviously you do, Rainne,” her mother yelled back. “This lifestyle you insist on living will get you killed one day. It’s bad enough that you want to waste your life doing nothing, but I’ll be damned if I’ll let your carelessness spill into the rest of our lives! This is all your fault. You’re damned lucky that I’m even willing to help you fix the mess you’ve made! Besides, he’s already been paid. You have no choice in this matter. That little stunt at my banquet the other night was the last straw!”

Rainne was getting tired of rolling her eyes at the ridiculous claims her mother made. It was the same crap she’d heard time and time again. Rubbing her forehead with the palm of her hand, she breathed out exhaustedly. “Fine, when will he be here?”

“This afternoon. I expect you to cooperate with him,” she muttered sternly. “And Rainne, don’t sleep with him, too!”

Screaming in frustration, Rainne slammed down the phone. “*God!* What the fuck did I do to deserve that bitch as a mother?” “*Don’t*



*sleep with him!*” Her mother’s words swam around her head. She snorted in disgust. *Please! It’s not like I’m the Whore of Babylon*, she thought angrily to herself.

She loved her mother, dearly, but couldn’t fathom how they could be so different. They had never been close. She had been a daddy’s girl, through and through. After the death of her father she had hoped that they would become closer, only the opposite had happened. Her mother had become even more distant, almost hateful toward her. Rainne’s father had taught her that family came first, always. It broke her heart that they were more like strangers rather than mother and daughter. She often felt torn between family obligation and what she thought her father would have wanted, or washing her hands and walking away from her mother’s world altogether. It had been an internal battle for years.

Looking at the clock, Rainne let a curse slip through her lips. She was going to be late for her shift at the dragon lady’s house. Throwing on her favorite Mary Janes, she grabbed her keys and her satchel and raced for the door. There would be hell to pay if she was late, and she’d be damned if she’d get bitched out twice in one day.

In Rainne’s haste to lock the door, she dropped her satchel in the hall. As she twisted up from the floor, crap in hand, she slammed into a human wall just to bounce back down on her ass, spilling the contents all over again.

“What the hell, man!” she hollered out. Just then her view focused on what was probably the most menacing man she had ever laid eyes on. He was huge, at least six feet, five inches tall, with dark brown hair that waved just above his crystal blue eyes that were staring down at her with a savage glare. His suntanned skin covered what looked to be chainmail armor rather than muscles. The skintight, white T-shirt that was tucked neatly into a pair of military camouflage pants just accentuated the effect. Glancing down at his combat boots, she instantly felt small, but part of her wondered where she could acquire a pair.

He bent down, grabbing her under her arms like a toddler, and with one swift motion she was back on her feet. She swayed, grasping onto him to keep herself from the floor. Handing her things to her, he growled, "Name's not man. It's First Lieutenant James Decker, Special Forces."

"You must be the babysitter Carol sent. Nice," she scoffed. "Well, hate to cut this meeting short, Jimmy, but I'm late for work." *This is such bullshit, not only am I not in the mood for this right now, but you are almost four hours early.* She was not ready for this, not yet, and by the looks of him, maybe not ever.

\* \* \* \*

As she spun to walk away, James grasped her upper arm, pushing her against the wall, with his broad hands moving to her shoulders. Her mother had warned him about her lifestyle, the wild parties, the drugs and sex, the lowlifes she surrounded herself with, the sarcastic, unpolished attitude. By the looks of her, the woman who hired him wasn't far off. She was dressed in a black T-shirt with a thin, long-sleeved, red blouse underneath it. The black skirt she wore came halfway to her knees and had red ruffles peeking out underneath it. On her feet were big, black, chunky heels. She was tall for a girl, even without the four-inch heels. She was five feet, eight inches tall, and a little on the chubby side, but perfectly proportioned, smooth. Her hair fell around her shoulders in chocolate brown, spiraling waves. It made her look even paler than she really was. Her big brown eyes were glaring up at him while the dark blue lipstick that adorned her bowtie lips formed an over exaggerated pout.

James released his hold on her. Standing back and crossing his big arms over his chest, his lips turned into a snarl. He proclaimed, "First of all, you look like Halloween gone wrong! Furthermore, my name is James not Jimmy, and I'm no babysitter, girly-girl. I'm also not here to put up with your bullshit. I'm here to keep your ass alive! Starting

now, I'm in charge, and you're not going to work today. Your mother already informed your partner of your situation, and you have the next few days off."

Her mouth opened to blast him with no less than a dozen expletives, he presumed, when he bent down and scooped a duffel bag off the hall floor, slung it over his broad shoulders, and announced in an authoritative voice, "Now, show me where I'll be sleeping."

"Sorry, G.I. Joe!" She snarled. Her stubborn little chin jutting out, she looked like a furious kitten looking for a brawl. "I don't play with action figures anymore. It's bad enough my mother is all of a sudden so interested in my life, but you're not stepping foot into my apartment! Why don't you go shack up with She-Ra!"

*Lord, how many cartoons does this chick watch?* Pulling his long fingers through his hair, he blew out a harsh breath. "Look, lady!" he yelled, bending down and getting nose to nose with her. "I'm really sorry that my shadowing your spoiled ass is going to interfere with your drug-induced orgies, but I have a job to do! I intend to do it with or without your cooperation! Now, we can do this the easy way or we can do this my way. Your choice!"

\* \* \* \*

Rainne stood dumbfounded in her kitchen waiting for the garlic bread to finish up in the oven and trying to calm herself by concentrating on her favorite Dead Kennedys album she was playing. It wasn't working. She still couldn't believe she'd let him in, but when his cool blue eyes glared down at her with murderous intent, she didn't feel she had a choice. Her pussy was still wet thinking about those eyes. *Jeez, when do I fall off the wall because of a pair of eyes?* She mentally cussed herself out. *Lord, could my nipples have gotten any harder when he grabbed my arm?* It was bad enough that he had to follow her everywhere, but did he really have to stay here? She didn't play well with others, and she liked, no, loved living alone.

*Fuck!* she screamed mentally. He was like a bulldozer on legs. As soon as she showed him the couch he'd be parked on for an undetermined amount of time, he kicked into high gear. First, he swept the apartment for bugs, as he called them. Then he rummaged through her drawers looking for drugs. Rainne knew her mother believed her to be a drug and sex addict, but it was unreal how determined he was in his search.

The realization of what he had seen in her bedroom drawers had made her want to melt into a puddle of humiliation on the floor. Her phone was now tapped. He took her cell phone. *My cell phone!* her brain screeched. She loved her ringtones. Not only were they hard to find, but they brightened even the worst day when her phone rang. She had just acquired that new phone cover. The one he replaced it with had some high-tech tracking crap on it. Rainne really had tried to listen when he explained it, but all she heard was that she wasn't allowed to put stickers on it. She was also outfitted with a tracking device in her purse, and a GPS unit was hidden in her car.

When had her life spun so out of control? One minute she had a nice little business helping the handicapped and elderly with their daily lives. The next...Well, at least her band was still on track. Music had been her one and only outlet since before she could remember. It just seemed to call to her. No matter the time, place, outfit, or mind-set, there was a song to fit. She surrounded herself with music like people wrap themselves in blankets. The oven timer snapped her out of her mental ass kicking. *Hopefully*, she thought, *this guy is as good as he appears and he'd be gone soon.*

\* \* \* \*

*What the fuck have I gotten myself into?* As James stood under the frigid water of the shower trying to get his rock-hard cock to recede, the thought fluttered around and around in his head. Since he left the service, he had done security. It wasn't the best gig, but you stick with

what you know. Never anything like this mess, though. He guarded heads of state, foreign diplomats. If the money hadn't been so good, he'd have laughed that lady right back into her BMW. She seemed so determined to find her daughter's stalker. An ex-boyfriend she'd said, drug dealer.

Rainne wasn't exactly put together, but something was amiss. He hadn't found any evidence at all that she was wrapped up in any kind of drugs. The background check he'd run before heading down here turned up nothing. No arrests, no tickets, nothing. The only evidence of a boyfriend past or present was a few bad porn movies on her computer, stacks of erotic novels, and one of the smallest vibrators he'd ever seen. The flush in her cheeks when he'd found it in her drawer along with all that lacy underwear...Whores didn't blush when someone raided their underwear drawers. He let out a soft groan thinking about that blush. *Ugh! What the hell was I thinking?* His mind howled. She was the opposite of his type. *Blue lipstick? Who the hell wore blue lipstick? It looks ridiculous.* Still, he couldn't get over the blinding fact that all he could think of was those blue lips encircling his dick. This was a nightmare. He'd do his job and go home to his solitary existence. As he turned off the shower, he grimaced. *What kind of a hell have I stepped into? What is she listening to? Is that even music?*

Something was definitely out of sorts. When James stepped out of the bathroom, the heavenly smell of lasagna filled the apartment. Rainne motioned him to sit and join her for dinner. He noticed that she had changed her clothes. She now donned a pair of brown cotton drawstring shorts and a powder blue tank top. The girl liked tattoos. Her face looked innocent, cute, now that she had washed the makeup off, but what struck him like a gunshot to the chest were the violet and black bands of bruises around her arms going from her wrists to her shoulders. As she bent over the inside of the fridge to get two Mountain Dews, he noticed the polka dot splotches going up and down her legs. Some were a yellowish tint, old wounds. His cock

would have stood at attention staring at that ass, but instead he had a stabbing need to strangle the life out of the piece of shit that would dare to touch her in that manner. Mentally, he paused. *Why do I care?* It was his job to find the person responsible for her attack, but he never got involved with his jobs. He liked his life, no one to look after or bother him with their bullshit.

\* \* \* \*

Rainne shifted nervously in her chair as she ate her salad. He was staring at her bruises. She hated feeling pitied. She lived her life on her own terms, without judgment and without her mother's money. She didn't have a lot, but she had her dignity and her privacy. She had convinced herself that was all she needed. She did understand that because she kept her mother's world at arm's length, it gave Carol's imagination free reign to run rampant, and boy did it run. In the past it hadn't mattered. If only she hadn't gone to that stupid banquet. It never occurred to her that he would follow her there. God, she had just gone out for a smoke to get away from the overbearing comments surrounding the fact that she was a huge disappointment to her family.

"Looking pretty fine tonight, my little freak." The memory was so vivid. She could feel the goose bumps crawling through her bloodstream. Every time she saw him, her body flipped out. Nausea, goose bumps, sweating, and a violent uneasiness that made her want to run for her life swept over her. It had been the first time he'd gotten physical with her, though. He had never even touched her before. She couldn't wrap her mind around the hatred he seemed to feel for her. They didn't even know each other. If the security team at the party hadn't been doing their jobs, she surely would've walked away with more than the concussion and bruises she received in the struggle with him. At least they had a lead. The cameras got him. Six months of the sheriff's department's bullshit and nothing.

It all would have been worth it if her mother hadn't been there.

She'd been replaying the scene at the hospital, later that night, in her head over and over again for days now. "How could you bring that trash to my party?" her mother bellowed as the doctor was stitching up her scalp. "I've never been so humiliated in all my life! My business partners and clients were there." Rainne sat silently and watched while her mother threw a Paris Hilton-sized tantrum. "Brawling like a white trash couple! You should be on Cops!"

Rainne was snapped out of her mental replay by the deep voice that sat across from her. "What?"

"Who delivered? I didn't hear the bell," he asked, looking at her with suspicious eyes.

"I made it two days ago and froze it. Good thing I did because I was supposed to go to the store today. That was until Momzy called with the fabulous news that I was getting a house guest." She flashed him a mocking smile and went back to pushing her salad around her plate.

"You cooked this? Not too shabby. It's been a long time since I've had a home-cooked meal. I usually eat at the diner in my town. They have great chili, cheese fries." He scooped the last bit of lasagna into his mouth and followed it down with the last of his Dew.

\* \* \* \*

As he sat back in his chair, he contemplated her. She was strong, but uncomfortable in her own skin. She gave off an air of kindness, almost sweetness, but there was a wall there, high and impassable. She didn't trust. That much was obvious, but she could fake it well. The war in his head was raging. After only a few hours, he felt like he knew all he needed to know, but wanted to know so much more. What he was warring over were the whys and the why-not's.

\* \* \* \*

With a crooked eyebrow, she mocked him from across the table. “I am capable enough to feed myself.” She snorted. *Look at him*, she thought, *smug*, the opposite of what she went for in a guy. She liked her men with hair to match her rainbow lipsticks. A boy she could share belts with. He was seeping testosterone, almost choking her. It repulsed her that she couldn’t get the smell of him out of her head. When he had grabbed her in the hall, he’d been so close. His scent assaulted her. Pure male. She felt her face flush just thinking about it. She felt like a stupid little girl in his presence. She saw how he scoffed at her apartment, her blood red walls and her colorful furniture. Her head told her he was *too serious*. He probably liked skinny blonde bimbos with fake boobs and fake personalities. Her head beat at her from the inside, *not for you!* Yet when he walked near her, her body told her he was exactly what she needed, and so much more if the bulge he had in his pants in the hall was any indication. *I wonder what he would taste like?*

Leaping from her chair and grabbing their plates, she headed for the sink and vigorously started washing them. She had to pull her shit together. *Not good, my p p ussy is leaking like a faucet. Why*, she asked herself. She had to get these thoughts out of her head. She wasn’t a doormat for men. She refused to be weak and start acting like those little country club girls her mom had been trying to turn her into for the last thirty years.

“You okay? You seem kind of jumpy?”

“Fine!” she snapped. “I’m just not comfortable sharing pleasantries with one of my mother’s spies!” Slamming the sponge down into the water, she scurried to her room, and locking the door behind her, she sank to the floor. Bringing her knees to her chest, she wondered what the hell she was going to do. She had to get out of here. Grabbing the closest pair of jeans and yanking them on, she laced up her green Doc Martens, jerked a hoodie off her door, and climbed out the bedroom window and down the fire escape.



\* \* \* \*

“What the hell was that all about?” he muttered under his breath. Still sitting in his chair at the table, he could do nothing but shake his head as he slowly raised himself from his seat. Very slowly. The steel rod bulging under his jeans was making it impossible to move comfortably. This was his worst nightmare. Her mother had been very specific with her instructions. She made it very clear he was not to fuck her, not to let her engage in any destructive behavior, and not to let her out of his sight. They were to find the ex-boyfriend and turn him over to the authorities for the assault. Her mother had been adamant that she would throw herself at him. She had done just the opposite, even though it had been obvious to him that she wanted to do just that. He could practically smell the cream dripping from her cunt. It was mixed with a hint of peaches. He’d always been partial to the scent of peaches. Nothing about this case was adding up. He’d found none of what the mother claimed. In any case, he’d let her chill out and then check on her before he headed to bed, giving him some time to get his body under control.

He’d seen a lot of things throughout his life, growing up in the mountains of upstate New York and married to the military since he was old enough to join. He was a soldier, a hunter, and tracker. He’d never seen anything like these cartoony, skeletal animals she had scattered around. When he asked her about them, all she had to say was, “Even dead animals need love.” She was different all right. Her apartment was different, dark yet with splashes of color. It was obvious she lived alone and liked it that way, yet scattered far and wide there were letters, pictures, postcards, and other tokens that hinted that she was welcomed and well-liked by the people who shared her strange little piece of the world.

After he cleaned up the kitchen, he made a lap around the large studio apartment, cleaning and straightening as he went. He took the time to study her things, get a feel for her life, rummage through her

filing cabinet and computer files. After a few hours, it was nearing midnight. He had to check in with the boss lady in the a.m. It was time to hit the sack.

The knock at her bedroom door went unanswered. “Rainne, if you’re in there, you need to answer me.” Nothing. “Rainne!” His voice rising to a commanding level. He figured if she was going to act like a child, she would be treated as such. “Open this door or you will be forced to replace it when I rip it from its hinges!” Nothing.

A split second later he surged into the room boot first as the door splintered into three pieces. Immediately, he knew she had left. “Fuck!” Darting around the corner and returning a half second later holstering his firearm, he threw on his bomber jacket and flung himself down the fire escape. He figured she had a pretty hefty lead on him, but he loved to track his prey. He’d find her.

## Chapter 2

Shamrock's Pub was Rainne's home away from home. Her band played here every weekend, and her best friend Annie did karaoke a couple of nights a week. When she entered the bar through the haze of smoke, she could see Annie. Rounding the DJ booth, Rainne moved into her outstretched arms. "Well, Helllooo!" The high octave welcome always made her smile. Annie was one of the first people Rainne had met when she moved out of her mother's house. "So how's Carol? Has she calmed down a bit?" she asked with a sarcastic glint in her eye.

"Hell no! She bought me a mercenary babysitter! Ya know, she didn't seem to have time for me or my stalker before I got my head kicked in at that dinner and embarrassed her in front of all her snotty friends. That woman!" she growled. "I'm afraid she's going to try to get me to move back in with her. She's been sending hints around that she's found a nice cookie-cutter husband for me, if only I'd lose some weight and behave myself."

"Oh, lord! I bet he's an ass kiss from her company, some little boy who will dress you up in pearls and take you yachting," Annie said with mock enthusiasm.

"Oh, dude! I think I just threw up in my mouth a lil' bit!" she yelled back. "Besides, what about the band? Who would keep you out of trouble? That's a job all on its own. I should get hazard pay for all that shit!" They both laughed as Annie handed her a draft beer.

"Wait a minute!" Annie shrieked. "Did you say mercenary babysitter? Like Rambo?"

"Yeah!" she proclaimed, wide-eyed. "He's a real stick in the mud,

very intimidating.”

“Is he hot?” Annie asked excitedly.

“What is wrong with you? I don’t know! Besides, he’s not my type. He’ll do his job, report back to Mommy of my sinful lifestyle, collect his booty, and flee.”

“Maybe he can tap your booty before he leaves?” she asked, wagging her eyebrows.

“Annie!” she screamed at her friend. “God! I don’t need to get laid!”

“That, my dear, is exactly what you need. Anybody would be lucky to have you. Besides, when was the last time you got laid?”

Rainne’s eyes rose to meet hers, and with a ragged breath, she exhaled and said, “I don’t remember, a year at least.”

“Damn, girl, you are a better woman than I,” Annie said with disbelief. “Go sit. You’re up soon,” she said as she went back to her booth.

Rainne picked a seat at the table her friends were at and lit a cigarette. Waving to the waitress, she mouthed the words, “The usual.” After a few songs, a few drafts, and some chicken wings, Rainne was starting to relax. Karaoke always relaxed her. Close friends, cold beer, and great talent. This was definitely her idea of heaven. Every song held a different memory, a different emotion. Rainne sat back in her chair and watched her friends plot her mother’s punishment with mock enthusiasm. They were always there, always helping. They were her family.

“I say we kidnap her, dress her in jeans, and take her to yard sales this weekend.” Markus, Annie’s husband, laughed. Markus had a great smile. It went well with his short, blond hair and deep green eyes. He had a kind look to him.

“Yeah, God forbid she has to mingle with the commoners.” Her business partner and bass player, Rebecca, smiled while she licked her boyfriend Joel’s ear.

“No!” Joel chimed in. “I say we take her to one of our shows and

throw her into the mosh pit.”

“God, Joel! We want to teach her a lesson, not kill her!” Rainne exclaimed. Her friends hated her mother for her lack of caring. She was never a girl who expected people to fight her battles for her, but it made her feel good that she had people to help with hiding the bodies if the need ever arose.

“Up next, we have Rainne!” Annie announced from the stage.

Rainne set her beer down and rose from her seat. Slapping Markus in the back of the head and giving him a determined look, she said, “Touch the wings and you die!”

As Rainne took the stage, the bar disappeared. She couldn’t see anything but the gel lights above her head. Adjusting the mic stand, she felt the rush of adrenaline that always hit her when the music was turned up. Hearing a great song was like a religious experience. Her heart seemed to beat in rhythm with the tempo. All was right with her world when the music was on and she had the microphone. Knowing that for the next five minutes the world wouldn’t be able to bother her, it was her and her song, it gave her a sense of peace.

\* \* \* \*

*God, this place is a dump. Her mother was right about that anyway,* James thought as he took a seat in the shadows at the back of the grungy bar. As he sat watching her, he was initially going to go sit with her, but he figured if she ran because she was hiding something, he’d get more information back here. Her mother had given him a list of places she frequented along with a laundry list of things she was sure she did at these places. “God, karaoke!” he scoffed under his breath. *This should be good,* he thought, with an eye roll.

Carol had told him in detail of how Rainne had been singing since she was a little girl. “Her father put that insane thought into her empty head,” she had sneered. The woman assured him her talent, or lack thereof, was the family joke. “She thinks she’ll be famous!” she had

proclaimed. “Always has music on. Plays it so loud in her car it shakes the windows of the house when she drives up. It’s embarrassing! It’s not normal. She must be a drug addict. I’m sure she has orgies with those deviants in her band. She was not raised to be so wild, so out of control.”

Sitting watching her interact with her friends, he could tell, even from a distance, that she was comfortable. For the first time since she’d bounded to the floor in that hallway, she seemed to relax, smile even. She had an amazing smile. Warm and friendly, it reached her eyes, giving her a glow. Boy could she eat. She’d been downing wings and beer since she sat down. That had always been something he’d seen men do. It was incredibly sexy to see a woman eat like that. He hated the women he had dated in the past, when he would take them out to a restaurant just to sit and watch them sip water and ration a crouton.

He was snapped out of his thoughts by the DJ announcing Rainne’s turn at the mic. He was taken aback at how the bar seemed to be anticipating her song. Amid the cheers, she jumped to the stage and adjusted the mic stand. When the music started, he saw something shift in her. She was confident, graceful, determined. She opened her mouth to sing, and his jaw hit the floor. He by no means knew anything about music, but she was good. Her voice was powerful, sensual. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. When the song ended, the crowd erupted into applause. She flushed with this look of amazement. She was beautiful.

\* \* \* \*

Taking her seat at the table, Rebecca leaned over to her ear and with a bob of her head motioned to the shadowed table in the back. With a wicked grin, she chimed, “Someone’s got a new fan.”

Rainne felt the hairs on her neck stand up. Her first thought was that her stalker had invaded her safe house. In the six months he’d

been following her, he'd never come here. Her stomach churned. Swallowing tightly, she shifted in her chair to glance back. When she did, she came eye to eye with James. As a curse slid through her lips, she turned around in her chair and folded her arms over her breasts. "Dammit!"

"Well? Who is that?" Rebecca asked.

"That's the guy I was telling you about. I can't believe he followed me."

"Well, isn't that his job?" Annie said as she took a seat next to Markus. Glancing over Rainne's shoulder to get a better look, her mouth dropped agape. "Damn! That has to be the best thing your mother has ever bought you! Ouch!" she yelled as Rainne kicked her from under the table.

"I just need him to do his job and leave so I can have my life back. Speaking of leaving, that's my cue." Rising from her chair, she dropped some money on the table for her food. After hugging her friends goodbye, she headed for the door, not even glancing in James's direction to see if he was following.

\* \* \* \*

*Did she really think by ignoring me I would just go away?* James thought as he got up and stalked after her. He hit the street, giving her some distance. The Bluetooth device securely attached to his ear hummed. Tapping it, he whispered, "What's the word, Alton?"

"Hey, James," Alton stammered surprisingly, as if anyone else would be calling him on this line. "I finished the test on the swabs you ran in her apartment."

"And?" James sighed impatiently. While he searched her apartment, he swabbed surfaces for drug residue. He had also sent the contents of her hard drive and her cell phone to the mobile lab for his partner to analyze. If she was familiar with her stalker, Alton would know.

“Nothing,” Alton stated plainly.

“Nothing? There can’t be nothing, Alton!” He growled. “There has to be something.”

“James, I’m telling you there isn’t. I ran the tests three times to be sure. No illegal substances,” he sighed, “and her credit report is immaculate. The only thing she has is the payments on her car, and they are all up to date. No suspicious transactions to or from her bank accounts.”

“What?” James hissed into the headset. “That can’t be, Alton. Her mother claimed that the stalker had called and e-mailed her.”

“He has, but Rainne never called him back. The numbers he called from were traced to several prepaid cell phones. They were probably paid for with cash. A dead end. The e-mails were never replied to, only forwarded to the sheriff’s department. The e-mail address is a Yahoo account. I hacked the mainframe, and our boy registered with fake name, address, the whole bit. I also found...”

James cut him off as Rainne entered the park and tripped over what appeared to be her boots. “Gotta go, Alton. I’ll call you later.”

James raced up to her as she stood up from the ground, bending at the waist to grip her torn and bloodied jeans. “Ah! Crap!” She gasped loudly.

Leaning down on one knee, he attempted to grasp her hands to assess the damage she’d done to herself.

Jerking away from him, she screamed, “Don’t touch me!” Jumping, she lost her balance and fell straight backward, slamming her head on the sidewalk. James flinched at the crack that followed.

Shifting his weight to both knees, he looked down at her face. “Holy shit! She’s out!”

Checking her pulse, it was steady, no blood from behind her head. Shaking his head, he lifted her in his arms, cradling her against the wide expanse of his chest. He carried her home.

\* \* \* \*



After carefully laying her in bed, he left her to go get the first aid kit he'd seen in the bathroom earlier that day. He remembered thinking it was the most expansive kit he'd ever seen, but after witnessing her little stunt in the park, it no longer surprised him that she would need such provisions.

Carrying it back to her bedside, he slowly undressed her. Unlacing her boots, he had to smile thinking she probably had a lipstick to match them. Sliding her jeans down her legs, he grimaced at not only the bloody mess she had made out of her knees but at the true extent of her bruising. He was amazed she could walk. While unzipping her hoodie, he slowly turned her body to slip her out of it and pulled up her tank top so he could examine her. He ran his fingers across the silken flesh of her torso and his chest clenched with some unknown emotion as he examined the abused skin on her body. She was one giant bruise, with eclectic scars scattered about. "What happened to you?" He groaned softly. Swallowing the bile that rose in his throat, he tenderly cleaned and bandaged her knees. The palms of her hands weren't too bad, but that crack on her head would give her a hell of a migraine come morning. Placing an ice pack under her head, he flipped the comforter over her body and rose to leave the room. James paused in the doorframe to glance back at her face, so peaceful, she looked so innocent. She looked like a little kitten needing protection. Sighing quietly, he backed out of the room, stamping down the urge to climb in next to her and hold her close.

Reaching the living room, he plopped himself down on the couch. He flipped open his phone and called Alton back. He had to get to the bottom of this situation. This girl was an enigma, wrapped in a riddle.

"HC Enterprises," Alton answered

"Alton, it's James. I need you to get her medical records for me," he barked quietly.

"Already done, dude. The girl is a mess."

"Yeah, tell me about it." James sighed, rubbing his hands roughly

through his hair.

“Well, she’s had several hospital stays for bronchitis. Had to have her finger reattached at the age of eight.” Clearing his throat, he continued, “She had four hospital stays due to head injuries that resulted in concussions and several abuse claims filed by the hospital administrators.” Sighing heavily, “All were dropped due to lack of evidence, and all of this happened before she was eighteen years old.”

As James listened, a fury was brewing inside him. He stifled a growl and tried with desperation to smother the need to hit someone, something.

“After eighteen there was a reprieve for quite a few years and then it kicked into high gear. Seven hospital visits for broken ribs, five for contusions to the face, multiple stitches. She’s had several teeth knocked out, two overnight stays for stab wounds to her torso, and an appendectomy.” Breathing exhaustedly, James heard him slam the file down on his desk. “She’s also broken her left leg, her right foot, and suffered a third-degree burn on her left arm.”

Leaning back roughly on the couch, he groaned. “Jesus Christ! What kind of hell has she been wading through?”

## Chapter 3

Walking through the apartment, Rainne took her time getting ready for work. Strolling slowly, sipping her coffee, she smiled at her freshly painted walls. She loved the color red. She was so proud of herself for finding the cobalt blue couch at the swap meet. The color popped out in the space, made her feel almost cheery. She checked her watch, right on time as always. She had to go to the store for one of her clients on the way to their house.

As she got out of her car at the store, she started to get a feeling of panic. Swallowing her fear, she locked her car and proceeded toward the door. Passing the rear of her vehicle, ‘he’ jumped out, grabbing the front of her belt and swinging her around, slamming her back into the car. Pressing his large body against her, he leaned down close to her, inhaling her scent.

“Hmmm, you always smell so good, my little freak.” She stared into his face as the fear crawled through her body like a spider. He wasn’t overly menacing, physically. Seen walking down the street, you might think he was attractive. He was tall, six feet three inches. His dark, chestnut brown hair was cut short to make spikes on top, giving him that just-out-of-bed look. He was thin, but toned like a swimmer, but his dark green eyes piercing right through her now, that was menacing. One could almost see the blackness of his heart in them. “Always look so pretty,” he said with a hiss. “It makes me wonder how pretty you’d look with a bullet in your head.” With that he turned on his heel and strolled away.

Rainne rolled off the bed, a scream ripping from her throat. Crawling desperately across the floor, she backed herself into the

corner. Pulling her knees close to her chest, she began rocking back and forth. As she closed her eyes, she started chanting one of her favorite songs, trying to calm her nerves. She heard the click of a bullet being loaded into the chamber of a gun and swore her heart stopped. Rainne gasped, opening her eyes. She froze.

\* \* \* \*

James put the phone down and marched through the house, nothing much to do but lock up for the night. When the scream pierced the quiet apartment, James grabbed his .357 off the coffee table and slowly crept toward the bedroom door. Pausing outside the doorframe, he listened, waiting to hear the sounds of a struggle. Instead, he heard the smallest voice, barely a whisper. "Only the strongest will survive. Lead me to heaven, when we die. I am the shadow on the wall. I'll be the one to save us all." Turning the corner, he spied movement. Cocking his weapon, he poised to shoot, pausing on a pair of big, brown, tearstained eyes staring back at him.

"Rainne, are you okay?" He placed his firearm on the floor and moved to his knees in front of her. The horror that he saw in her eyes broke his heart. She looked so lost.

Rainne studied him for a split second, and without warning, she leaped into his arms, sobbing. "Just hold me!" she cried. "I'm sorry! Please just hold me. It was so real. I could feel him..." Her proclamation broke off as she broke down in his arms crying.

James stilled. He had to admit this wasn't something he had experience with. He sat Indian style on the floor, pulling her onto his lap, and held her tight. "Shush now," he crooned, stroking her hair. "It was just a dream. You're safe." He calmed her, trying to ignore the painful bulge in his pants. Tried to ignore his body's need to take her right here on the floor. Nothing good could come from him scaring her. Despite her tough outer exterior, she was fragile. Burying his face in her hair, he rocked her gently. After several seconds or a few hours,

he couldn't be sure, she stiffened. Jumping to her feet and grabbing a robe off a nearby chair, she proclaimed, "I need coffee." Padding out of the room, just like that, she was gone, and the wall was back.

\* \* \* \*

Jerking the belt closed on her robe, Rainne paced impatiently in front of the coffeemaker, mentally slapping herself. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*, she yelled at herself. *Why did I do that? God, how humiliating. He probably thinks that I was trying to seduce him, not that I would even know how. Shit. Could he tell how wet I am? Probably. I probably left a puddle on his lap.* She groaned mentally while pouring herself a cup of coffee and moving quickly to the table.

James came into the kitchen and poured himself a cup. Sitting down across from her, he said, "I think we need to take this opportunity to talk."

Rainne flushed. *God, where is a hole to climb into when I need one?* "I'm really sorry about that. I'm not a big fan of human contact. I don't know what came over me." She laughed nervously.

\* \* \* \*

Keeping his face emotionless, he cleared his throat. *God, I'm not sorry about that. You fit into my arms like you were custom-made to be there. The only thing I am sorry about is your quickness to throw that wall up at me.* He put the thought out of his head. She was a job. She couldn't be anything more than that. From the size of that wall she'd built for herself, she had no intention of being a part of anyone's life. "Actually, I was referring to the other situation. I need some information to help me find this guy."

Glancing up from her cup, she smiled. "Sure. Shoot. My life is an open book."

"Your mother told me that you know your stalker and you're

refusing to cooperate with the sheriff's department." He breathed out heavily.

Gently setting down her cup, she rolled her eyes. "Boy, I could build the Great Wall of China with the bullshit my mother tells people about me."

"So you really don't know him?" he asked, surprised.

"Hell no! The only thing I know is that he's creepy!" she stated, wide-eyed. "He showed up about six months ago. I would see him at the club. I thought he was just a fan. Soon after, he started showing up at the grocery store, or I would see him walking by my building. I was always nice to him, but he gives me the creeps." She shivered slightly and continued, "A few weeks ago he approached me in a parking lot and asked me out on a date. I told him no, that I wasn't looking to date right now. He was angry. He said that I would regret rejecting him. He said that I needed him and just didn't know it. The next time I saw him was my mother's party."

Leaning forward on his elbows, he said, "So what else has your mother told me that isn't true?" He was a master at knowing when people were lying, and Rainne hadn't lied to him yet.

Staring up at the ceiling, thinking, she said, "Well, let's see. How old did she say I was?"

"Thirty-nine. She said you were getting ready to turn forty." He had to admit that that was one of the more confusing points. If she was almost forty, she couldn't be a drug addict unless she had plastic surgery. Her face was so young looking, no wrinkles or bags.

Snorting loudly, she startled at the noise, covering her mouth, and blushed, deeply. "Wow! Carol's getting crazier!" Getting up from her seat, she went across the room and rummaged through her purse. Slapping her hand loudly on the table and then throwing herself back into her seat, she asked with an amused look, "How do ya like them apples?"

James looked down. It was her driver's license. "January twenty-first, 1979?" he asked, confused.

“Yeah! I just turned thirty last month,” she said, giggling. “Carol never did remember how old I was. She’s a drunk. Her memory is shot. Let me guess. She had a lady named Sara with her when she came to hire you?”

James nodded.

“Sara is her assistant. Her memory, if you will. My mom used to be really capable, but after the accident, she started drinking. She’s never been Mom of the Year, but no one deserves to carry around that kind of guilt,” she stated sadly.

\* \* \* \*

Looking at his face, she could tell he didn’t have a clue of what she was talking about, so continuing, she said, “About ten years ago my parents were out for the night. It was raining, and my mom was driving. She lost control of the car, and my dad was killed. She spent the next year having surgery and doing physical therapy. She recovered, but now she drinks like a fish.”

James folded his arms across his chest and asked, “So what else?”

“Well, I don’t do drugs. My mom caught me smoking pot when I was seventeen and from then on...” She trailed off with a shrug. “I stopped smoking pot when I moved out. Couldn’t afford it.” She grinned.

Regarding her through narrowed eyes, he asked, “So, what about the sex? Your mother seems to be under the impression that you’re having orgies with your bandmates, and random people you encounter.”

Rainne jerked, almost choking on her mouthful of coffee. “Well, being that my sex life is none of her business, I don’t see how it matters.” Cocking her eyebrow, she flashed him a mock smile.

Keeping his voice low, almost menacing, he stated, “If you are sleeping around, that could be your guy’s trigger, jealousy.” He then returned her mock smile before getting up to refill his cup.

\* \* \* \*

Rainne lowered her head and flushed the deepest red he'd ever seen. Quietly, she muttered, "I haven't been with anyone since, Phillip. That was almost a year ago. It was an ugly breakup. He told my mom that I cheated on him the entire relationship. She believed him over me. She blamed it on the band and my friends. Ya know, my 'deviant lifestyle' and all that." She made quotation marks in the air and rolled her eyes.

Stealing back to his seat and sipping thoughtfully on his coffee, he asked, "Who's Phillip?"

"Phillip is this guy who works for my mom. He's a senior VP or something. She introduced us at one of her many snooze fests she calls parties. He seemed nice enough, boring, but nice. When he asked me out at the end of the night, it never occurred to me to say yes. He's just too pensive." Getting up for a refill, she leaned against the counter. Sighing, she continued. "The next day Carol called me, irate. 'How dare you embarrass me, you'd be lucky to get Phillip. God, Rainne, do you know how much I pay that man?' She was pissed." Plopping back in her seat, she laughed to herself. "She was relentless! She wouldn't stop till I went out with him, so I did. Worst mistake of my life. I'll tell ya that right now!" Shaking her head at her own stupidity, she took a gulp of her coffee.

"How bad did it get?" he asked, motioning with his hands.

Lowering her gaze, she blinked back the tears building in her eyes. "Phillip didn't like me, not really. For my birthdays, he would buy me weight loss programs. Ya know, Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers? He was always making fun of my clothes, my music. He tried to get me to leave my band, not see my friends. When I wouldn't get in line, he started abusing me." Closing her eyes, tears streamed down her face. She took a breath to steady herself and continued. "At first it was just him telling me how fat and ugly I was. He never let



me forget that I was a freak show and nobody would want me.”

Wiping her tearstained face with the sleeve of her robe, she lowered her eyes to play absently with the ribbon that doubled as a belt. “He came to me one night. We sat down for a long chat about our relationship. I thought he was going to break up with me. I was happy because every time I tried to break up with him he just came right back.” Looking up at nothing in particular, she said, “He tried to convince me that I was a joke, but he could fix me. ‘If only you’d listen to reason,’ he told me.” Looking back down at her mug, she continued, “I told him that if he wasn’t happy with me, then it wasn’t meant to be because I had no desire to change for anyone, least of all him.” Pausing thoughtfully, she was trembling. “When I got up to leave, he grabbed me by the arm and punched me in the face. I rolled over onto my back to see him standing over me, screaming. ‘You’ll change, you little bitch! I’m sick to death of doing this favor for your mother just to be embarrassed by you at every turn!’ After that it was all downhill.” Shaking her head and exhaling exhaustedly, she sipped on her coffee and stated plainly, “That’s who Phillip was.”

James sat in his seat, fighting the growing rage that threatened to consume him. “Jesus! Did your mother know about him hitting you?”

“Yeah, she tried to convince me that it was my fault and if I would just do as Phillip asked, he wouldn’t have to hit me.”

James was enraged. *How could a mother let her only daughter get abused and then help the abuser continue the act?* He was dumbfounded. It was beyond belief. “How did you finally get rid of him?”

“I had a gig. He forbade me to go, so when he went to go pick up dinner, I snuck out. When we got done, he was waiting backstage. He was so mad. He lunged at me, and Markus caught him around the neck and fucked him up. Markus told him that if he ever came around me again, he’d kill him. Phillip told my mom that I left him for Markus.” Standing up and stretching, she moved to the sink to rinse her cup out.

James sat, pondering the situation, pondering Rainne herself. She was so strong. He wasn't sure if even she knew how strong. Ripping him from his thoughts was his alarm. It was time to start the day and time to face her mother. *This ought to be fun.*

## Chapter 4

“Yes, ma’am, she’s been very cooperative.” With Rainne in the shower, James thought it would be a good time to call her mother with an update.

“Good, it’s nice to know she is *capable* of finding her manners. What have you uncovered? Anything new?” she barked.

“Nothing on the stalker yet, but we’re still waiting on the reports from the sheriff’s department. Mrs. Stanton, you seem to have some misconceptions about your daughter. Our tests turned up nothing and, well, no disrespect, but I think you may have misjudged...” He was abruptly cut off.

Her voice rose sharply. “Don’t tell me what I do and do not have, Mr. Decker! You think?” She sniffed. “I don’t pay you to think. I pay you to find that piece of trash. Don’t think for one minute that you know my daughter, Mr. Decker. That little girl wants to waste her life, fine, but I’ll be goddamned if she’ll spill her trash on my doorstep! Now! Speaking of my doorstep, I’m having a gala tomorrow night. I will expect Rainne to be in attendance. You need to get her there promptly at eight o’clock. I have ordered clothes for the two of you, and they will be delivered later today. If there isn’t anything else, I will see the two of you tomorrow night.” She hung up without the bother of a goodbye.

“Jeez, what a bitch.” Muttering to himself, James put his phone back on his hip. Spinning around, he froze.

Rainne emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel, hair wet and tangled, cascading down her back. Turning the corner into her bedroom, she poked her head back around the corner and giggled.

“Don’t worry ‘bout Carol. I just haven’t saved up enough money for her operation. As soon as I do, she’ll be fine.”

“What operation?”

“The one to get that stick removed from her ass.” Disappearing into the room once again, she continued, “Was it totally necessary to kick in the door?”

“Well...yeah! By the way, you run like that again, I’m beating that ass of yours,” he snapped.

“Don’t you threaten me with a good time,” she moaned breathlessly from the other room.

James’s mouth fell open, his cock jerking under the tight confines of his camouflage pants. *God, that moan*, his mind screamed, *would she make that noise with my rod buried in her mouth? Stop!* He couldn’t think like that. He’d hurt her. The things he thought of doing to her would make her run, and not just off to karaoke, but the need to spank her kept flowing through his thoughts. *Why*, his brain pondered. He never thought of spanking his women before. Why now? She wasn’t even his woman.

Still, his hands itched to do just that.

\* \* \* \*

Inside, Rainne was dying. “Just get dressed and keep your mouth shut!” she hissed quietly to herself. *It’s bad enough I admitted all that embarrassing shit to him about Phillip, but now he’s going to think I’m hitting on him, too? Talk about pathetic. I couldn’t give him the short version. No! I had to tell him about the weight loss programs and the insults.* She had never admitted that to anyone. It hurt to discuss it in the privacy of her own head, but to admit it out loud to another human, especially that particular human. She watched herself in the mirror as the war in her head continued. She watched herself blush in humiliation as she thought about what she had actually told him. At the time it had been easy to talk to him. He appeared to be

genuinely interested, and the information had seemed important, but now...she just felt inferior. The hatred she felt for Phillip was profound. She had always been comfortable being herself even if she had always been 'a little left of center' as her father used to tease. She was different, always had been. That had been okay...until Phillip. Some days she wished she could be the type of girl who liked pearls and lace. *But I'm not, I like punk music and black lipstick.* The doubt was what she hated, the constant second-guessing of everything she did or liked. The nagging voice that told her she wasn't good enough for anyone and never would be.

\* \* \* \*

The day passed quietly. The clothes were delivered just as promised. James couldn't believe the suit he had to wear. It screamed "penguin."

As James sat at his computer communicating with Alton at the mobile lab that was parked in the parking lot, Rainne sat on the floor in the corner strumming her guitar and scribbling on a worn-out notebook. He watched her in his peripheral vision as she concentrated. He was dumbfounded at how fascinating she was to him. He had been sitting here racking his brain for some conversation starter to get her talking. He felt like a dumbass, he was tongue-tied.

"What's the name of your band?" He tried to keep his tone light.

Rainne's head popped up from her book. "Um, Noise Box." She sighed.

"You don't seem thrilled."

"It's not that. I'm just having trouble with this new song. We have a competition coming up in a few days, and I want to unveil it, but I'm stuck." Blowing out a harsh breath, she turned her attention back to her instrument.

He turned to face her. "How long have you been in this band?"

"Since I moved out after high school. They're a great bunch of

people. It's hard to be a girl in music, especially when you look like I do, but we all have faith that we'll make it." She smiled shyly.

"What happens if you don't make it?"

"Well, then I can be proud of the fact that we make great music. Fame is the last reason anyone should be a musician. Chances are it will never come, but if it does, I wouldn't walk away. Are you hungry?" Completely jumping subjects was one of her many talents.

"I could always eat."

\* \* \* \*

After dinner, James sat on the couch, stuffed to the gills. "That chocolate cake was great." He groaned.

"Thanks. I invented the recipe myself. The cherries keep it from being dry. There's nothing worse than dry chocolate cake." She grimaced.

Clearing the table, Rainne pattered around the kitchen and then proceeded to the rest of the apartment, lazily straightening and dusting. The knock at the door startled her. Giving James a wary glance, she crossed the floor to open the door.

"Who were you expecting?" he asked through narrowed eyes.

"No one." Opening the door and looking down, she spied the beautifully wrapped gift at her feet. Trembling, she picked it up and read the card.

FOR MY BEAUTIFUL LITTLE FREAK

"Shit!" she hissed. Putting the box on the table, she backed away slowly, rubbing her arms.

James jumped to the box, reading the card. "What the hell is that?" he snapped.

"It's from him," she whispered. The fright was evident in her voice. "That's what he calls me." Lowering her eyes to the floor, she

shivered. “Freak.”

James opened the lid to the present and paused. Lifting the contents, he asked, “Do you have any idea what this is supposed to mean?”

Rainne felt her knees give out and she dropped to the floor. Clamping her hand over her mouth, she fought the vomit threatening to spew out. “Oh, my God! Merlyn!” she screamed.

“Merlyn?” he asked, perplexed.

“Merlyn was my cat. He disappeared a few months ago. That was his collar.” Sobbing heavily, Rainne wrapped her arms around her legs, pulling them to her chest and burying her face.

\* \* \* \*

Crouching down next to Rainne, he couldn’t fight the urge to wrap his arms around her. Ignoring her struggles to get free, he held her tighter. “It’s going to be okay,” he whispered softly in her hair. When she curled up like this, turning herself inward, it broke his heart. He wanted her wrapping her arms around him, letting him in, letting him bear the weight of her sadness.

\* \* \* \*

Rainne stopped struggling, snuggling closer to him. He felt so warm, strong. His scent invaded her senses. After god knows how much time, Rainne finally cried herself out. She stood up with James’s help. She felt weak, small, and helpless. “I’m going to bed. Goodnight,” she whispered. Without another word or glance, she tromped away from him.

Slowly stripping down to her shirt and panties, she let gravity place the discarded clothes on the floor. Rainne sluggishly climbed into bed and tightly closed her eyes. *Disheartened isn’t the word, but it’s close. Am I next? When is all this going to end?* She knew her

questions and worries wouldn't be answered tonight, but she couldn't stop them from flowing into her mind. All that was left to do was hope sleep would steal her for a few hours and maybe the answers would come tomorrow.

\* \* \* \*

Late into the night, James found himself wide awake. He'd lost hope of falling asleep hours ago. He was trying desperately to ignore the tent his erect cock was making in his once loose-fitting sweatpants. The only sound was the restless shifting, soft moans, and mewling sounds coming from Rainne as she slept. He wondered who was invading her dreams. *What fantasies would make her make those noises? Would she make those noises underneath me?* He scoffed at that. He'd make her scream for him. *God! I'd kill to make her scream right now.*

\* \* \* \*

Waking up from her dream, drenched in sweat, Rainne rose shakily from her bed. She padded to the bathroom and glanced in the mirror. Her face was flushed. Getting a sip of water, she tried to keep her heart from thumping through her ribs. "What the hell is going on?" she asked silently. *How could James make my body react like this? After just a few days I'm ready to rape him. Maybe Annie was right. Maybe I do need to get laid, sh if that dream was any indication, Annie was right on the money.* She figured she'd better forget about sleep for tonight. She might as well try to get some writing done on her new song.

Creeping softly past the couch to get her notebook, Rainne spied James. Rather, she spied the huge baseball bat sprouting from under his pants. *I had no idea that dicks could get that big.* Her body instantly reacted. She could feel her stomach heating, instantly



wondering what it would be like to touch it. Unconsciously, before she could stop herself, she reached out her shaking hand to embrace it.

James's hand speared out, clamping down on her wrist, he jerked her down on top of him. Before she could gasp, James wrapped his big arms around her waist and stole a heated kiss. She braced her hands flat against his chest and pushed, trying to free herself, like that was going to happen. He ignored her struggles as he forced her lips apart to accommodate his tongue. This wasn't a kiss. It was a demolition of her will, her very soul. He would melt her. She had never been kissed like this, never dreamed anyone could ever be kissed like this. After what seemed like forever or a millisecond, she couldn't be sure, he pulled back. "Be very sure you want what I can dish out, little girl." His face was savage, and his voice harsh and raspy.

She couldn't do anything but whimper as one hand slid down her back and feathered against the crease of her ass until he got to the glaze soaking through her panties. Except for the vibration radiating through her body, she was still, frozen in place.

"Mmm, I bet you taste like a peach, too." Sliding his thick fingers under her panties, he groaned. "Is that for me, Rainne? Did you get that sweet pussy wet for me?" Bringing his fingers back to his face, he sucked on them.

Her eyes widened. She had never seen anything so naughty. Never heard words so explicit directed at her. She couldn't comprehend what to say or do. Before she could unravel her thoughts, he flipped her onto her back and hovered over her.

"You do taste like peaches," he whispered in her ear. "I love peaches." His voice was husky, lust filled. Running his hands under her T-shirt, he pulled it over her head.

She couldn't make sense of what was happening. She couldn't sort out the different sensations. Her body was rioting. She heard a low, seductive moan rise from her chest when he wrapped his big

hand around her breast and licked it vigorously with his tongue. *Was that me?* A low chuckle escaped his lips before they locked around her nipple, making her arch to him. “I knew you’d be soft as a kitten,” he moaned, his lips moving down her abdomen.

Shivering at the compliment, Rainne tensed. *What am I doing? What is he doing? I have to stop this.* A high-pitched squeak escaped her lips as he gave her panties a strong tug and ripped them from her body, throwing the tattered material aside.

Moving between her thighs, his breathing hitched.

“What a pretty pussy.” Rainne sat straight up like someone shot her with a Taser. Staring at James, her mouth opened to say something, but then just snapped shut when nothing came to mind. She jumped off the couch, only to be caught around the waist by his bulging arms. Holding her in a death grip against his huge body, he wrestled her to the floor. She had no hope of escape as his weight crushed her into the padded carpet. His thigh coming up tight against her weeping pussy, she could feel his rock-hard cock against her lower belly.

“Where ya goin’?” he asked, his face flushed. He looked almost angry.

“Away,” she whispered, her body trembling so bad she feared a seizure. The instinct to run was so overwhelming, yet she couldn’t wait to see what came next. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

“Just relax, baby.”

“I can’t...um.” Panting for air, she could feel a heated blush move across her face. “No one’s...ever.”

His body shifted to the side, releasing her from his weight. Laying his palm on her trembling stomach, he gazed into her eyes as he frowned deeply. “Are you a virgin, Rainne?”

“No,” she said, her voice cracking. “It’s just no one ever did that before. It took me off guard.” *God, how mortifying!*

His brow sunk into a frown. “You’ve never had your pussy eaten? What about Phillip?”

Rainne vigorously shook her head. That thought churned her stomach.

“What about the others?” he asked, gazing down at her through his thick lashes.

\* \* \* \*

Her glance met his with a wide, doe-eyed expression. “There weren’t any others. Phillip is the only man I’ve ever been with. On the rare occasions we did have sex...it didn’t involve a lot of extras.”

Her eyes broke contact to stare off into nothing. Her embarrassment was evident. Gripping her chin firmly, he again caught her gaze. “Did Phillip ever make you come, baby?”

Averting her eyes, she mouthed the word “no.” A tear slid down her blushing cheek.

Without any warning, his lips came down on hers, possessing her in a kiss that she couldn’t have ever dreamed existed. His moan echoed around her as he broke away. “That should be fucking illegal.” Positioning his body over hers, he kissed a path down her body, setting a fire wherever he touched. Moving lower, he maneuvered himself between her quivering thighs. “Just relax, Rainne. I’ve got you.”

Jutting up onto her elbows, she stared down at him through heavy-lidded eyes. She felt high, weak. *God, my name on his lips alone could make me come.*

Smiling seductively, he lowered his head. He slowly ran his tongue from her seeping entrance to her swollen clit, circling it slowly. “I’m going to lick you like an ice cream cone.” He moaned against her.

Floating flat to the floor, Rainne cried out at the sensation. *God, this should be illegal.* She was helpless against that tongue. As he suckled her clit, abusing it with his tongue, his name screamed from her throat.

Rising to hover over her and balancing his weight on his hand, he leaned down and rolled her nipple between his teeth. “You are so wet, baby.” Running his fingers between her folds, he circled the entrance to her pussy and slowly pushed inside. “Such a tight little kitten,” he whispered against her nipple.

Rainne’s back arched to a sensation she’d never felt. Like birth and death all in one. Closing her eyes, she dug her nails into James’s shoulders. “Oh God, James!” Holding her breath, her body began to shudder. With a strangled whimper, she went limp, sprawling onto the floor underneath him.

## Chapter 5

Rainne's eyes fluttered open, instantly aware of the fact that she'd never slept so soundly. She felt rested, energized. Secondly, she was aware of the intimidating erection pressed between her butt cheeks. They flexed unconsciously. Her eyes widened as she felt herself being rolled onto her stomach.

Laying his body atop hers, he kissed the nape of her neck. "Good morning, kitten." Pressing his thick cock through the crease of her ass and bracing his weight on his elbow, his other hand ran along the underside of her body. He found her creamy fountain and slowly stroked her clit, making her buck against him.

Rainne couldn't control her body. She could feel the wetness trickling out between her thighs. Raising her hips slightly, instinctually she gasped as she felt James's broad member press against the entrance to her cunt. "Relax, baby," he crooned. "Relax that pussy and let me in."

Slowly, she felt him ease inside her, inch by inch, stretching her tight entrance. "Oh God, James!" She tried desperately to fight the panic welling in her body. An urgent need to flee was clawing at her from the inside out. Her body burned pleasantly for him. She had never been so wet, so needy. Her head told her this was a bad idea, but her body was screaming for more.

\* \* \* \*

"Good girl," he moaned in her ear. He could feel her in inching away from him. He grasped her shoulder to anchor her in place. He

needed her to relax. His fingers sped up, vigorously circling her clit, feeling her pussy juice drip down his balls. James's control disappearing quickly, he drew back, an inch from exiting her completely. Pausing for a moment, he could feel her squirm underneath him and finally relax. He filled her to overflowing with one swift motion of his hips. "God, Rainne. You're so tight. You're going to cut the circulation off to my dick."

A scream escaped her lips as she struggled to take his girth. "James..." she whimpered.

"Yeah, come for me, kitten. Come all over that cock," he hissed as he felt her juice drip onto his fingers. He started to thrust, slow and deep, inside her.

\* \* \* \*

Rainne had never felt anything like this before. She couldn't tell if it was pleasure or pain, but she could tell she wanted more. Pivoting her hips to meet his thrusts, she cried out, "Yes, God, yes!"

Increasing the pressure on her sensitive clit, an animalistic growl rumbled in his chest as he picked up his pace, driving harder into her.

Rainne's head snapped back, her eyes wide. "*Fuck...yes!*" she screamed, her body quaking underneath his as her orgasm overtook her senses.

"Good girl. Take that dick, baby!" He groaned. Rocking back on his haunches, he grabbed Rainne's hips, pulling her to her knees. Holding her tightly, he leaned back and proceeded to slam into her tight cunt.

Rainne forced her body to relax, forced it from pulling away out of instinct. Nothing had ever felt so good. She could hear her screams mixing with James's. Suddenly her body felt hollow, as James pulled out. A manly shout surrounded her as he showered her lower back with his pleasure.

As they collapsed onto the floor next to each other, their chests

were heaving, fighting for enough oxygen to move.

“Wow!” Rainne exclaimed.

“What?” A harsh breath escaped his lips.

“Annie was right.” Giggling, she turned to look at him. “You are the coolest thing my mom’s ever bought me.”

James laughed out loud. “Well, I’ve been told I’m worth every penny.” He slowly raised himself from the floor and strolled toward the bathroom.

Rainne heard the shower start as she sat up. She could feel the soreness creeping over her body. Moving with slow, methodical movements, she rose from the floor to walk toward the bedroom. As she walked past the bathroom, James held his hand out to her. Clasping it, he pulled her into the shower.

\* \* \* \*

Maneuvering her under the spray, gently washing her, he racked his brain for an explanation for his actions. He never got involved with his clients. He never lost control with his women, never. He couldn’t help himself around her. He was like a horny teenage boy. She was so soft, innocent. He’d never had such a tight pussy wrapped around him. She engulfed him, completely. Just washing her was more pleasure than he’d experienced in...well, ever. Just this simple act was enough to make him want more, more touches, more glances. He just wanted to be near her.

\* \* \* \*

Standing under the spray, feeling his strong hands washing her, Rainne battled with her arms to not cover herself. The water felt so good. His hands felt better. She had never stood naked in front of anyone before. It made her feel self-conscious.

“You are so beautiful. Relax, baby. Let me wash you,” he

whispered as he caught her gaze.

She forced a nervous smile and nodded faintly. She tried desperately to relax as his hands moved expertly and efficiently over her body, like he'd done it a thousand times. *Of course he's done this a thousand times. Stupid! He's probably got a girl for every day of the week. Look at him for god sakes! He's a beast, strong, confident, and male, all male. Stop! Don't do this to yourself. When he leaves, it will just suck all the more. Just enjoy this. He's caring for you. It's sweet. Stop fucking it up!* Snapping her out of her mental war was James towering over her, handing her the loofah.

"You know the old adage." He smiled down at her with the sexiest grin. "I wash your back..." Rainne took the sponge from him and very timidly started to wash his chest.

\* \* \* \*

He couldn't believe how good her hands felt. She almost seemed afraid of hurting him. Her touch was like the softest feather. She seemed to be exploring every inch of his body as she cleaned him. "That feels so good," he said softly.

\* \* \* \*

"Th...Thanks," she stammered. "I've never washed anybody, under the age of sixty, before." *Wow, way to kill the mood. Let's just bring the image of me washing an old raisin!*

Pulling her into his chest, he whispered into her hair, "Me either."

Rainne felt a knot rise in her throat. Why was him acknowledging that so important to her, she couldn't know. It made her happy to believe it, none the less, even if he was just saying that to be nice.

\* \* \* \*



After finishing their shower, Rainne threw on her robe and proceeded to make breakfast. She wasn't really hungry, but history had taught her to eat a big meal before her mom's parties. Even if she didn't lose her appetite at the pretentiousness of the party itself, she never again wanted her mother to see her eat.

James entered the kitchen and sat at the table as she placed a stack of blueberry pancakes in front of him.

"Dig in," she chimed, bouncing back to the counter and retrieving her own plate.

Sitting across from him, after last night and this morning, was...weird. *What should I say? Does he think the breakfast is some sort of fat girl payment for sex? Does he realize that in fourteen states, sex the night before then breakfast together the next morning make us common law married? Why can't I get my brain to shut down?*

\* \* \* \*

"Stop thinking so hard," he said, taking a sip of coffee. *She is so adorable, probably racking her brain over unanswered questions. She is so complex, her brain always churning, always wondering. It's fascinating to watch.* "So what's with the banquet?" he asked with a grin.

Clearing her throat, she flushed. "Well, it's best to eat beforehand. I either can't recognize the food they serve, can't pronounce it, or can't see it because it's so small." Grimacing, she took a bite and chewed nervously.

Watching her, he knew there was something else. "Is that the only reason?" he asked, tilting his head.

Averting her eyes from his, she murmured, "I don't eat in front of my mom."

He was a master at reading people, repetitive patterns, body language, and facial expressions. He could tell when someone was

holding something back or lying. It was obvious she didn't want to talk about it. She was already a bundle of nerves, so he decided not to push the subject. "So what's this party for anyway?"

She smiled. "Don't ask me. My mom throws parties like other people change their underwear." Rolling her eyes, she continued, "My mom's friends, her employees, and investors will be there. Hopefully we will be able to sneak out early."

Rising up from his chair, James started clearing his dishes. "Why is it so important that you be there?"

"Take your pick...She says it's to show me off, but I suspect it's to suck me into her life. She knows I hate her lifestyle, the people, and the excess. She doesn't understand why I'm not clamoring to be a part of it." She followed suit with her dishes.

As he watched her fill the sink with water, James could tell there was, again, something else. "And?" he urged.

Sighing regretfully, her shoulders slumped. "I think she's trying to marry me off to one of those spoiled, pampered, egotistical pieces of shit she calls colleagues. She seems to think it's important for me to marry well. I told her that *if* I get married, I need it to be for love, not status. She said that love is overrated, that I was a fool. It sucks. She makes me mingle, and all the assholes line up to dance with me. It's awful. They're not interested in me. They just want my mother's money."

The sound of James's phone broke the conversation. He plucked the cell from his belt and answered it. "Hey, Alton."

"We have movement on the e-mail account. It's pretty graphic. He intends to strike...and soon." He sighed heavily.

"Were you able to trace the feed?" James could feel his blood pressure skyrocketing.

"Yeah! But..." Alton sucked a breath in through his teeth.

James was quickly losing his temper. "But what, Alton!"

"He ran it from an Internet Coffeehouse downtown on Fourth Street. We have him on tape, but he used a stolen credit card. The

owner of the card died two days ago in a suspicious car crash. The sheriff said someone cut the fucker's brake line." His voice raised an octave. "We got a trace on the card. I'm sending you the contents now. You should have it momentarily."

"Alton, I'm going to need the team here first thing in the morning," he said, running his hand through his hair roughly.

"They're on their way, James. Check out the e-mail, bro. I'll call when I have more."

James heard the phone click dead and raced for his laptop.

Rainne seemed fixed in the kitchen, her eyes glued to him.

Opening the e-mail, James was taken aback at the aggression.

*Don't think for a minute that your new boyfriend and his friends are going to chase me away.*

*You're mine! Make no mistake about that, Rainne!*

*You shouldn't deny me, Rainne. I'd hate to see anything happen to Merlyn, your friends, or your precious clients. I'll be seeing you very soon, my little freak. I can't wait to hear the new song. Be sure to wear the blue skirt. I'll enjoy peeling it off of you later that night.*

The e-mail was accompanied by a few pictures of his penis and assorted sexual torture devices. *This guy is definitely a sicko*, James thought angrily. "Rainne, where does your band practice?"

Looking up from chewing her fingernails, she bucked off the counter she was leaning against and walked over to him. Bending down to study the e-mail, she gasped. "A warehouse downtown...wait," she exclaimed. "How does he know about the new song?" Her eyes narrowed.

"I think he's bugged your practice space. My team will be here in the morning. We need access to the warehouse." His chest tightened with a possessive fury he'd never felt before. He'd be damned if this guy would come within a hundred yards of her. He'd kill him first. Jesus, he had never been a jealous man, but between Phillip, the

unknown men she'd have to dance with tonight at the party, and the sick bastard stalking her, James was pretty sure he would be bald from tearing out his own hair by the time this mission was finished.

Staring wide-eyed at the disturbing images, she nodded absently. "Sure...Sure, not a problem. I have practice tomorrow anyway. Your team can crash there if they like. It's pretty big, and it's loaded with furniture. Shit, is that the time? I have to start getting ready." Jumping up, she headed towards the bedroom.

Looking down at his own watch, he marveled. "We have hours till we have to leave! What's the rush?"

"It will take me that long to be able to pass Carol's inspection," she called from the other room.

## Chapter 6

James stood in the living room buttoning his suit and adjusting his cufflinks. “We’re going to be late. Are you ready yet?” he asked impatiently, ready to get this night over with.

“I think so,” Rainne said nervously.

James looked up to see Rainne come out of her bedroom. His breath halted. She was dressed in a floor-length, fire-engine red dress, long-sleeved, with the neckline just hinting at the top of her shoulders. His gaze flowed downward to see delicate-looking high heels, of the same color, carrying her forward. Her deep brown, riotous curls cascaded down her back, being held from her face by platinum and diamond butterfly clips. Around her neck she wore a matching diamond pendant. She was radiant.

Applying an even layer of lipstick, she smiled timidly. “How do I look?”

James had no words. He’d never seen anything so beautiful. “Wow!” he exclaimed. “Red is definitely your color, kitten.” Taking her hand, he led her out of the apartment.

James paused at the door for a moment and spoke into his sleeve. “We’re on the move,” he stated authoritatively.

Looking around bewildered, Rainne grinned. “Who are you talking to?”

“My partner Alton is in the mobile unit keeping tabs on us through GPS,” he said as he led her into the elevator.

“Where is he?” she asked, fidgeting.

“He’s on a bus in the parking garage.” Taking her hand as they exited the elevator, he motioned towards the very bus he was referring

to as he pressed a keyless entry unit and a 'beep, beep' echoed through the parking complex.

Rainne paused as James opened her door for her. He was holding open the door to the biggest Hummer she'd ever seen. "Do you know how much gas this thing burns?" she scoffed. "That is the biggest environmental plight on the road."

He motioned with his free hand. "Just get in."

Stepping up to the vehicle, she paused. The seat came almost parallel to her breasts. Before she could wonder aloud, he gripped one hand under her arm and the other on her hip. Placing her foot on the step, she jumped in. As he closed the door behind her, she leaned over the seat and opened his door for him.

James paused behind the Hummer, hearing the door open. He instantly remembered something his father told him. "Always open car doors for the ladies. If she returns the favor, she's a keeper." Chuckling softly to himself, he entered the driver's side and fired up the engine.

\* \* \* \*

Rainne looked around the interior of the vehicle and was amazed at the complexity of it all. "Holy Starship Enterprise, Batman," she chimed, giggling. She had an overwhelming urge to start pushing buttons.

James glanced at her, a smile dawning on his face. "Yeah, it's pretty high tech. We travel for work, and it helps if we take the fewest vehicles possible. We normally take this one and the bus."

"It must be cool to travel all over." She was desperate to hear his voice. It seemed to caress her, it didn't matter what he said. As long as she heard his voice.

"You must've traveled all over the world with your folks," he said.

"Not likely," she snorted. "My folks never took me anywhere.

Their trips were for business, and my clients rarely leave their house. I've never been farther west than Colorado."

\* \* \* \*

Wow! He couldn't imagine not traveling. "What exactly do you do for a living?" He couldn't help but ask. Her mother had said she was a maid.

Rainne cleared her throat. "For the ones that live in their homes, I cook and clean, I do their shopping and banking. Take them to appointments. Take care of their animals. Whatever needs to be done. We have a few who are in nursing homes, and their kids pay us to keep them company. We go a few times a week and play bridge or have lunch with them." A small smile graced her face.

James couldn't miss the resolve in her voice. She loved what she did. "That's very noble. Is it hard emotionally? When they die or when you have to stop going because they can't pay you anymore?"

"Well, we never turn anyone away because they can't pay. We do what we can for them. We also refer them to free programs that can help. We have a client in a nursing home now. His kids couldn't afford to keep paying us to visit him. They live too far away to visit more than a few times a year, and they want to make sure he's being cared for properly. I talked to the family, and we worked out a deal. I go twice a week and eat lunch with him and take him to the park. When his son comes down, he gives free checkups and shots to some of my clients who have pets that can't afford a vet bill. It all works out well." Looking at him, she smiled sadly. "As far as the ones that die? Well, we miss them. They become like grandparents after awhile. We're closer to a lot of our clients than their own families are."

"That's ingenious. You are a really good person, Rainne." He had an overwhelming feeling of awe wash over him. He never met anyone who was so unselfish, so giving, just because it was the right thing to do.

Blushing deeply, she added, “Well, I wouldn’t saint me just yet.”

Making eye contact with her, he wanted to make sure she really heard him. “Rainne, you should be proud of what you do. Not many people would do those things, go to those lengths to make sure another person was taken care of properly.”

“Thank you,” she replied simply.

Pulling up to the house, James was taken aback at the excess of the property. Her mother seemed to be able to find every tacky, overpriced decoration on the planet. Pulling up to the valet, he noticed Rainne looked almost green. “Are you okay?” he asked, turning to her.

“I feel sick,” she said, almost hyperventilating.

Taking her hand, he squeezed it gently. “You’ll be fine. I’ll be no more than a few feet away all night.” Catching her glance, they both nodded in unison as the valets opened their doors.

Climbing the front steps to the door, James could hear the whispers and snickers from the other guests. “God! She looks like a red-light special,” one woman whispered to her date. “I can’t believe she showed. At least her date looks more respectable this time.” *What’s up with them?* Glancing at Rainne and noticing that her face matched her dress, he knew she heard them, too.

Entering the house and handing their coats off, Rainne was informed that her mother wanted to see her for inspection. Rainne took a ragged breath and squared her shoulders as she entered the ballroom. Following behind her, he could see the speculating expression on her mother’s face.

As she approached her mother, he witnessed her fidget nervously with her dress. “Hi, Mom,” she said, clearing her throat. Shivering slightly under the scrutiny of her mother’s gaze, she chimed, “Well, do I pass?”

Carol Stanton frowned deeply and said, “You’ll do. I am glad the dress fit.” James watched as she actually rolled her eyes at her daughter. “Really, Rainne, you’d be so pretty if you just lost some



weight. Now, go mingle. Several men have been asking about you all night, and Phillip is here,” she snapped.

“Okay,” Rainne said quietly, gliding past her, moving deeper into the room.

As James went to follow, he was stopped by Carol’s hand gripping his arm. “I expect you to act accordingly tonight,” she groused. “Stand off to the side, and do not interact with my guests.”

James nodded obediently. “I’m well aware of the drill, Mrs. Stanton.”

“Very well.” Releasing his arm, she stepped away to greet her guests.

James’s eyes scanned the room for Rainne. Finding her, he took a spot on the wall to watch. She looked so lost, frightened. It wasn’t long before she was asked to dance. He noticed how bored she looked dancing with the men in this social circle. How they all looked so pompous. They seemed to try so hard to grip her attention. One after another they cut in, keeping her on the floor for hours. He noticed a few of them off to the side and silently approached the wall nearest them.

“No! I’m telling you the rumors aren’t true, man. Phil just told her mom that so he wouldn’t be blamed for the breakup,” one man said.

“Really?” another said, surprised. “So what is true if she’s not the town doorknob?” He sipped on his drink.

“Well, as far as Phil says, she’s frigid,” another added, chuckling.

“Really? A hellcat like that? I can’t believe it. Why would he be fighting so hard after all this time if she was such a stick?” he asked.

“Money! She stands to inherit a fortune, plus if he marries her, he’ll get the company. What other reason could there be? I mean, look at her! Besides, no woman has ever refused him before. I think it’s eating him alive.” He laughed.

James moved away quickly, still keeping a visual on Rainne as he crossed the room. His fury begging to be unleashed, he stamped down a growl. *Yeah! Look at her, she looks like a flower. She is way too*

*good for them. They only see her as a prize.*

As Rainne danced, another man tried to cut in, but she refused him. James watched as the man stormed away furiously, straight to her mother. Carol made a beeline toward Rainne. Pulling her away from her dance partner, Rainne flinched, Carol obviously squeezing too hard on her daughter's already abused arm. Her mother's face twisted into a harsh gaze as she quietly berated Rainne. Releasing her, she stormed away.

Rainne's face hung toward the floor. She looked as if she were blinking back tears. Raising her gaze, she started to waltz with the gentleman she had previously refused to dance with. James was instantly filled with rage. *How dare she tell her daughter who to dance with. That must be Phillip.* James almost shook with the need to annihilate the man who had his hands on her, the man who had dared to raise his hands to her. The same man who was now moving outside into the garden with her.

As James followed, he could almost feel the fear rolling off Rainne. He stepped just outside the door to keep her in view.

"Rainne, be reasonable!" he snapped. "You know it's going to happen eventually. Carol won't let you marry anyone else. You're mine."

Crossing her arms across her breasts, she rolled her eyes. "Phillip, the last I heard, my mom doesn't have a say in who I marry, and I don't belong to anyone...especially not you! She can have the money and the company! I don't want it! I don't want you! You have your own money! Why do you want me so bad?" Her face turned stubborn.

Stepping toward her, he sneered. "You think you're so much better than me? You little bitch! No one says 'no' to Phillip McCray, Rainne. No one!" he yelled.

She blinked back at him with a look of shock and amazement. "Phillip, it's been a year! Let it go already!" she urged.

With that, she stepped aside to walk past him back into the hall. Phillip reached out, grabbing a handful of her hair, pulling her back

against his chest and clamping his hand around her throat. "I'll have you..." James cut Phillip's threat short by pulling a very large firearm out and pointing it directly into his face.

"Let her go! I don't want to have to kill you." The fury that boiled in James's chest was almost too much to bear. He wanted so desperately to pull the trigger and erase Phillip McCray from the planet.

Phillip threw Rainne into James's chest and backed away. "You want that piece of trash? Take her!" Walking away into the garden, he was gone.

Holding Rainne's trembling body with one arm, he holstered his weapon. "Are you all right?" he asked, moving a stray curl back into place.

Rainne was breathing heavily and trying to fix her dress. "Yeah, I think it's time to go home."

James quickly glanced around and gently took her hand. "Let's go." Leading her through the ballroom, they came to an abrupt stop just as they were about to step through the door and into the foyer.

\* \* \* \*

"What in the hell is going on here, Rainne?" Spinning around, she saw Carol standing behind them, arms crossed over her chest, tapping her toe on the smooth marble floor. "I just spoke with Phillip, and he's furious. You're about to lose him, Rainne!" Her voice rose furiously.

Rainne sighed in defeat. "Thank you for a lovely evening, Mother, but I'll be going home now."

"Rainne Stanton!" her mother scolded. "Do you have any idea of what I had to do to procure a relationship with Phillip in the first place? Just to have you go and screw it up?" She scoffed. "It was all I could do to talk him into giving you a second chance. You're throwing it all away!"

Rainne was dumbfounded. How long was this fight going to drag out for? It had been a year since her and Phillip split, and the tension between her and her mother was only growing. “Mom, I don’t want Phillip! When are you going to accept that?” Her arms rose questioningly.

Carol’s face was a mask of anger. “The McCrays are one of the most powerful families in the country. You should be honored to marry him. I’ll be damned if I let you marry some piece of blue-collar trash! Phillip is in line to take over the company when I retire. You need to marry him to keep it in the family!” She was yelling now.

Rainne’s mouth fell agape. “You! You set all this up to save your precious company?” Rainne shouted back. “God, why do you care more for that company than you do about me?” Her eyes were wide with anger.

Her lips thinned. “Because my company is not a huge disappointment!” Turning on her heel, she stormed away.

Rainne stood in the hall, frozen with shock. It was all she could do not to crumple on the floor in a ball. Grabbing her coat from the maid, she and James made their way to his Hummer. On the way home, she couldn’t even look at him. She was humiliated, crushed.

James sat beside her in the driver’s seat, silent.

## Chapter 7

As they entered the apartment, Rainne trudged to the bathroom and slammed the door shut.

Rainne sank slowly into the bubble bath, it felt so good on her bruised skin. Taking a deep breath and holding it, she submerged herself under the water. Sitting up in the tub, Rainne stared blindly at the tile. As her mother's words circled in her mind, she felt her heart clench till she felt like she couldn't breathe. She fought to hold back her tears. She hated crying. Her mother had always made her feel like it was a sign of weakness, and she hated feeling weak. Losing the battle with her emotions, Rainne quietly sobbed.

\* \* \* \*

Hearing the water run, James slowly paced the floor. Replaying the events of the evening, he ripped the suit off his body. *What kind of person puts their business before their children? How has she survived in that family all these years?* He had immediately gotten the impression that Mrs. Stanton was a coldhearted bitch, but this topped it all.

The sound of Rainne's misery bled out into the apartment. He couldn't resist going to her, holding her. Slipping silently into the bathroom, his gaze fell upon her. She looked so broken, so small in the huge whirlpool tub. "Rainne? Are you okay?" he whispered.

"Go away," she whispered, her voice shaking.

Stripping off his underwear, stepping into the tub, and sitting down, he moved a stray hair off her cheek and tucked it behind her

ear, sighing heavily. "I can't do that, kitten. It breaks my heart to see you cry."

Reaching out, he pulled her onto his lap, ignoring her shallow pleas for him to stop. He wrapped her legs around his waist until she straddled him. Kissing her shoulder gently, he placed her arms around his neck, adhering his body to hers.

When her body heat encompassed him, Rainne's discipline shattered. Her broken sobs escalated, holding him tightly, burying her face in his neck. He felt the hot steel of his cock grind its length against her pussy, making it spasm.

"Shh, it's okay. Don't cry, baby. They're not worth your tears." His hands slid over her back, comforting her. After several minutes, he felt her body relax against his. Her cries quieted, and her breathing evened out. He bunched his fingers in her wet hair and tilted her head back, taking her in a deep kiss. He couldn't resist any longer. He needed her in ways he couldn't describe. He wanted to make her forget the nightmare of this whole night.

\* \* \* \*

She instantly responded. Her body seemed to mold to his. Rainne's will was shot to hell. *Where has my resolve gone?* Her body didn't seem to care. She needed him, his touch and his taste. His taste was indescribable, a necessity. She couldn't get enough, couldn't get it out of her mind. Everything around her reminded her of it. She pulled back from the kiss as his heady moan broke the silence. Moving down over his jaw, she devoured his neck, licking and sucking down to his shoulder, her nails digging into the flesh on his arms as his hands moved, gripping her hips and grinding his rock-hard cock tighter against her pussy.

Pivoting her hips instinctively, she rocked her clit along the stiff shaft. His teeth clenched at the motion. She couldn't resist his touch another second. The need for him was clawing at her.

“Such a responsive little kitten. God, Rainne, if I don’t get that sweet pussy wrapped around my cock, I’m going to die.”

Lifting her slightly, he repositioned the tip of his member till it nudged the entrance to her tight channel. Locking eyes with her, she gasped as he slowly filled her.

She was nervous, biting her lower lip. “That’s it, baby,” he whispered as one hand reached up and cupped her face. She wrapped her arms around his neck and speared her tongue into his mouth. Her hips pivoted, trying to force her muscles to part for him, frantically. Her whimpers escaped rhythmically. She felt like an animal running on instinct. She needed to be filled by him, surrounded by him.

\* \* \* \*

The pressure to his cock was almost unbearable. Breaking the kiss, he ran his hands along her back soothingly. “Easy, kitten. We have all night.” Now breathless, it was all he could do not to pump into her blindly.

“God, I want it!” she cried, sitting up straight, placing her hands on his face. Her eyes pierced his soul. “I want it all!” Her face was the picture of need. She was so close her body hummed, helpless with need to bury him inside her.

James’s hands moved, gripping her ass, forcibly pressing his way through her tight muscles. He could feel them straining to take all of him as a cry broke from Rainne. Her clit played against his pubic hair, causing her orgasm to spill over him. As she got tighter, it stole his breath and his control. He couldn’t stand it anymore. He pounded into her relentlessly as she screamed. “*James!...Yes!*”

Spreading her ass, he used the tip of his finger to circle the entrance to her anus. “Did Phillip ever take you here, kitten?” His voice was rough, lusty.

“No.” She whimpered desperately, bucking against him. “Never.”

He pressed the tip of his broad finger inside her virgin ass, and a

groan vibrated from his chest. He felt her pussy loosen marginally, opening for him. "I'm going to fuck that ass, Rainne."

\* \* \* \*

Chanting his name devoutly, she rode him harder. Hearing the lust and desperation in his voice for her pushed her over the edge. The lewdness of his invading digit was too much for her system. Her body shook uncontrollably as her second orgasm hit.

"Good girl," he crooned as his finger suddenly got ferocious, animalistic as he forced her untried muscles to open for him. The rush of her heat that engulfed her as she soaked him with her release seemed to make him insatiable for her.

Rainne had never felt anything like this. She felt stretched, full. When her next orgasm hit, she was helpless, at James's mercy to carry her through. She came in never-ending waves. She couldn't make it stop, and she didn't want it to. "God, baby, don't stop. Fill me up!" she screamed.

"Birth control?" he croaked as he drove into her madly.

"Depo!" she cried. "Please, James, fill me up!"

He thrust himself inside her and stilled. Her scream barely registered in her own mind as she felt his release inside her. His cock was so big it bordered on pain as he stretched her.

She could feel his seed fill her. Quivering with her own release, she hugged his shoulders tightly and held on for dear life. It felt like she would rip in half, as he stuffed her to overflowing.

He removed his finger from her nether hole and slowly lounged back in the tub, holding her to his chest. Both of them were fighting for air, unable to speak. They held each other for what seemed like days.

*God, what are you doing? Her conscience berated her. Jumping into bed with a man you barely know? Your mother was right! He works for Carol! He could be a spy! Why did you have to beg him?*



*What are you going to do when he leaves?* Her mind fired questions at a dizzying pace as it always did. She learned long ago that stopping it or even slowing it down was a lesson in futility.

\* \* \* \*

“If you don’t turn your brain off, I’m gonna paddle that ass of yours till you do!” James felt her jump at his declaration and couldn’t help but laugh. Tilting his head down, trying to stare into the depths of her eyes, he could see the blaze of crimson invade her features. “What are you thinking about so hard?”

Averting her eyes, “I was thinking about this,” she stated softly.

He didn’t think it was possible, but her blush actually deepened.

“What exactly about this?” he whispered softly.

“Just the total insanity of this situation. I don’t want you to think...” She broke off her statement and took a steadying breath. “I can’t seem to find my control when...Um.”

Pulling her up so he was face to face with her, he cupped her face in one of his hands. While feathering a pattern of kisses onto her cheek, he was consumed with love for her. “As far as your control or lack thereof...You are so amazing, Rainne. The only thing I can think is that I want more. More of this. More of you.” He smiled. “This situation?” Sighing, he brushed the hair from her face to stare straight into her eyes. “It’s totally fucked up.” They both laughed. “I don’t know where it’s headed, and I don’t want to know. I want to enjoy this, you, as long as I can. I want the future to be a surprise. Isn’t it more fun that way?” Wagging his brows at her, he flashed a smile.

She possessed him in a kiss that made him groan deeply. She laid her head on his chest as he hugged her tightly. “I do love surprises,” she said with a smile. God, I never want this to end, James thought. Sex has never been like this, so carnal, so out of control, so perfect.

\* \* \* \*

Stop looking at me with that sexy grin, she screamed mentally. She stroked her fingers over his broad chest in an intricate pattern.

Shifting herself off him was the most difficult thing she'd ever had to do in her life. Stepping out of the tub, she grabbed a towel, then handed one to James. He towered over her, drying her softly. The look on his face was so affectionate, Rainne felt almost overwhelmed with emotion. No one had ever looked at her like that before. When he had her dry, he wrapped her tenderly in the towel.

She took her time drying him, drinking in his features with her eyes. He was so hard it boggled her mind. She'd never seen such a wall of man, not an ounce of fat on him. *He actually has an eight-pack!* Her mind wailed. *Is that possible?* It made her feel ugly. He was the epitome of what she would imagine a warrior to be. Her mind kicked into overdrive with self-loathing thoughts. Her stomach twisted into knots as it often did when she felt unworthy. She blinked back tears as a wave of self-disgust washed over her. *You're making an ass out of yourself!* She knew in her heart that he'd only said those things to get back into her pants again. She desperately wanted to believe he felt some kind of affection for her, but to allow herself that kind of hope was forbidden. Wrapping his towel around his waist, he took her hand and slowly led her out of the bathroom.

Entering the bedroom, he drew the towel from her body, tossing it on the floor. Dropping his own, he lay on the bed, pulling her to him, until she was draped over his chest. Wrapping his arms around her, he nuzzled her neck, humming in approval.

\* \* \* \*

She was so soft. She fit perfectly against his body. Whenever he was with another woman, he had a fear he would break her. He didn't think about that with her. She wasn't fat, just curvy, a real woman. Rainne was so beautiful in the elaborate lighting setup she had

throughout the apartment. She had Christmas lights strung from floor to ceiling, tracing the corners. It was ingenious, more than enough light to see, but it was soft, warm, like her.

“Get some sleep, kitten. The cavalry arrives at dawn.” Burying his face in her hair, he breathed in her scent. She smelled like rain. As he pondered that, he slipped slowly into sleep.

## Chapter 8

James was abruptly awakened by the sound of someone clearing his throat. His eyes flew open, and he instantly held Rainne closer. Through narrowed eyes, he spied his team standing in Rainne's bedroom. Possessiveness boiled up in him, and he tugged on the comforter to make sure they didn't see her naked body. That wasn't for anyone but him. Five men were standing by the door, their faces holding amused smirks. James mouthed the words, "Get the fuck out!" and motioned with his arm. As the team exited the room, he shifted Rainne out of his arms and tucked the blankets around her. Yanking on a pair of sweatpants, he knew this morning would be one of the more interesting he'd had in a long time.

As he slipped into the kitchen and poured himself some coffee, he couldn't help but be aware of the snickers from his crew as they watched him. Leaning against the counter and drinking from the mug, he snapped, "Wipe those shit-eating grins off your faces. We're here to work!"

As the group of men burst into laughter, Alton spoke up sarcastically. "Yeah, James, you should follow your own orders."

Throwing Alton a murderous glare, he stormed to the front door and opened it. "Get your asses down to the bus. We'll be down to meet you." Watching them file out of the apartment, James couldn't help but get angry at the speculating looks his crew gave him upon their exit. He knew he had fucked up by sleeping with a client. It was the cardinal rule to not get involved. Not to mention, his crew had never witnessed him in that type of situation. He strictly kept work and play separate, until now. Strolling back to the bedroom, he found

Rainne was already dressed and gathering her music equipment. “Sorry about that. I didn’t mean for you to be embarrassed like that. They didn’t see anything,” James stammered. He knew she was shy, and he felt bad that his team was so rowdy at times.

\* \* \* \*

Not looking up from her guitar case, she said, “I wasn’t embarrassed.” She wondered if the powers that be would strike her down for the lie. “At least I know they are good at what they do. You know, sneaking in here and everything.” Laughing nervously, she moved past him to set her gear by the door. Pulling her phone out, she called Markus. “Hey, practice has been moved up. Meet us there in like half an hour. Okay?”

“Um, yeah, no prob. I’ll get hold of the guys and we’ll be there. Will your soldier be there?” he asked with a teasing tone to his voice.

Rolling her eyes, she said with an impatient tone, “Yes! The rest of his team arrived this morning. They will all be in attendance. Oh, hey! I almost forgot. I think I have that song down. We’ll go through it today.”

“Cool! It’s about time. I trust you, but this down-to-the-wire shit makes me nervous,” he said with a laugh. “See you then.”

Rainne hung up the phone and grabbed her purse. Her brain wouldn’t stop replaying the snickers she heard from the security team. *God, you’re a fool*, she thought to herself in disgust.

“You ready?” James asked as he rounded the corner from the bedroom.

Rainne nodded timidly. She didn’t want to go downstairs and meet his security team. That would mean she actually had to look them in the eyes.

Attaching the Bluetooth headset to his ear, he stated, “On our way.” Grabbing the Fender amplifier from the floor, he headed toward the elevator.

Toting her guitar case, she followed, careful not to make eye contact with him. She didn't want him to think she was falling for him. She knew she couldn't keep him, no matter how desperately she wanted to.

Entering the parking garage, she saw the security team lounging outside the bus, waiting. As they approached, Rainne felt her face flame as she watched them study her.

Drawing nearer to them, they straightened up, standing in a line. "Rainne, this is Alton, Able, Sam, Riley, and Ash." He pointed each one out to her.

Trying not to look nervous, she smiled. "I...It's nice to meet all of you," she stuttered. She was blown away at their appearances.

They were all clones of James, a band of warriors. All they needed was armor and swords and they would be characters in the video games she played. Staring at the group in its entirety, they could have all been siblings. They were all well over six foot tall, broad and intimidating.

Turning to her, James stated, "You should take your car. We'll follow you." Picking up her amp, he headed for her vehicle. Loading her trunk, James turned to her. "Are you okay?" His look of concern matched his tone.

She tried to give him her best nonchalant look. "Yeah, why wouldn't I be? Are you riding with me?" *Could you sound any more desperate?*

"No, we think our guy has the warehouse bugged, or he's watching it. We want him to think that you're alone. We'll sneak in the back way when you're inside and do our sweeps. As soon as you get there, start playing. If the place is wired, the music will drown out our actions."

\* \* \* \*

He tried to keep eye contact with her, but that skirt she wore drew

his attention. It had his cock hard and begging to be buried in her again. Walking back to the bus quickly, he prayed she'd missed it.

Entering the bus, James was greeted with a rousing chime of "Oh!" from the team. They never failed to give him shit.

"That's enough!" he scoffed, rolling his eyes while making his way over to the table to join Alton. "What are you doing?"

Pulling up a window on the laptop, he said, "The GPS system you put in her car has a microphone." Alton threw him a loaded smile as he adjusted the volume, and the team gathered around the table to listen. Through the rustling noises Rainne made while she got ready to pull out of her space, they heard her cell phone ring.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Hey ho!" a female voice chimed in on the other line.

"Oh! Hey, Annie! Are you all on the way?" Rainne asked.

"Yeah, we're waiting out front. So! Markus tells me the entire team will be coming, too."

"Yup, but they're going to sneak in after me. Why?"

"Are they hot?" Bluntness was obviously something this woman studied, James thought as the guys burst into laughter.

"They all look like James." She sounded nonchalant. "Or characters from *World of Warcraft*. Take your pick," she said with a giggle.

"Whoa! Well with all that testosterone, you're bound to get laid," she blurted sarcastically.

James instantly felt five pairs of eyes focus on him.

"Shut up!" Rainne snapped. "Doesn't your husband fuck you enough?"

"Every day, mama, but you on the other hand, you need to get you some. Now I know that you're all celibate and shit, but I'm just looking out for my best bitch. You know I love you." Concern colored her voice.

"I know, and I love you, too. I just...It's hard to...I don't have a clue of what I need." Breathing out heavily, Rainne sounded almost

distraught.

“How has he been? Is he nice? Has he loosened up? Have you seen him naked? Is he hu...” Her barrage of questions was cut off by Rainne.

“Don’t finish that sentence!” Her voice rose feverishly. “He’s been very helpful. I wouldn’t say he’s loosened up, but he has been very nice. Does that answer your question?” she asked, clearly annoyed.

“Hell no! Don’t leave me hanging, Rainne.” It seemed Annie was getting equally annoyed.

“Wh...cshhhhhhhhhhhh.” The bus erupted in laughter at the obvious Rainne-generated cell phone static.

“An...ca...cshhhhhhhhhhhhhh.” They heard the phone click closed and hit the seat. “Oh, my god!” Rainne yelled. “Could she get anymore obsessed?” With a loud groan, Rainne started the car. After a few seconds of rummaging on Rainne’s part, they heard the pop of a lighter and loud music bleeding from not only the laptop, but from outside the bus. As she peeled out of the parking space, Riley sprang into action, jumping into the driver’s seat and trailing her.

As the bus headed into downtown, Alton motioned James into the rear sleeping quarter of the bus. Closing the door behind them, Alton turned to James. “So what’s the scoop?”

“It’s none of your business, Alton,” James growled at him. He didn’t want to discuss this with Alton or anyone else.

Blowing out a short breath, Alton squared his shoulders and glared at James. “It is my business. That little scene this morning made it my business. What the hell were you thinking?” The look on his face was an expectant one.

“I have no intentions of discussing this with you!” James’s voice rose angrily.

“You need to start talking about this!” Alton paced in the small space. “I know you, James. I’ve known you for years. You can’t be serious about her.” Slumping down on one of the beds, he looked up



at James.

James didn't know what to say. He knew he had strong feelings for her. He knew it was crazy. They had only known each other a few days. "I know, but I can't help myself around her." He ran his hands over his face. "She's different from any woman I've ever known, special. I can't even explain it, Alton. I'm not sure I understand it. From the moment I knocked her on her ass in that hallway, I knew something was different about this whole situation, about her."

Alton stood slowly, placing his hand on James's shoulder. "What am I gonna do with you?"

Both men chuckled as the bus pulled to a stop in the alley behind the warehouse. As everyone exited the bus, equipment in hand, the band had already started playing. He wanted to get this over with. He knew from experience that sweeps took a few hours for a building of this size. They would be the longest hours of his life.

## Chapter 9

Pulling into the parking lot of the warehouse, Rainne was suddenly racked with fear. It hadn't registered until now, "might have the warehouse bugged or is watching it." It felt like this was going to be the longest practice of her life. Getting out of the car, she was immediately bombarded by Annie, Rebecca, and the rest of the band. Placing her index finger in front of her lips to show that she needed silence, Rainne motioned them into a huddle and quickly explained about the possible invasion of their little piece of punk rock heaven. They all entered silently and set up their gear.

After checking her chords and tuning up her axe, Rainne sat on one of the plush chairs they had scattered about the room. She loved this old warehouse. The owner was an old man who had used it as storage for a shipping company. It was cheap, and as long as they kept the place up and rent was on time, he didn't care what they did in it.

Looking around her, she felt almost nostalgic, so many memories and good times. This place was so special to all of them. It was where they stored the crap that they couldn't fit into their houses. It was where they threw their parties, a small smile creeping onto her face as she spied the hot pink Christmas tree from last year that no one ever took down. It was where they crashed when they couldn't or didn't want to go home. The two rooms in the back were used for bedrooms. Often when they had parties, people spent the night. Rainne, Rebecca, and Annie had spent hours arranging the corridors to make it look like an apartment. They liked the homey feel it gave off. They often ate dinner here on the nights they practiced. It was cheaper than going to a restaurant and usually more fun.

Getting up and walking to the kitchen, Rainne opened the fridge and got out a six-pack of beer. After taking a lap around the room handing them out, she popped open her own and took a long sip. Setting it on a table, she strapped on her instrument and approached the mic.

“What are we starting with?” Joel asked, flipping his shoulder-length purple hair.

Rainne really liked Joel. He was the prankster in the group and one of the best lead guitarists she’d ever heard. She was glad when he and Rebecca started dating. They were good for each other. He wasn’t tall for a man. He stood about as tall as Rainne, but he was still a few inches taller than Rebecca. He had a really young-looking face and looked like he never grew out of his baby fat stage.

“I don’t care. Whatever.”

“I wanna do ‘Red Jumpsuit Apparatus’,” Rebecca chimed in. She was a cute girl with little pixie features. Her hot pink hair was cut short, but just long enough to wear it in little pigtails. It made her look innocent. She had a soft, cuddly look to her.

“Sounds cool,” Rainne said as she adjusted her strap. “One, two, one, two, three, four!” she yelled, and the band threw themselves into the punk song that taught them all not to hit chicks.

\* \* \* \*

Rounding the southwest corner of the building, Alton and James spied a suspicious and new-looking metal box perched on the outer wall. Alton brandished a knife from his boot and wedged it open, examining the contents. “This is a video receiver. Bastard’s got tape on this place. These babies can send signals about three hundred yards. He’s close.”

“Probably in a nearby warehouse. I’ll go inside and find the cameras,” James said with a snarl. “When the outside sweeps are finished, take Able, Riley, and Sam. Find the signal’s destination. Ash

can come inside and help me strip the interior. If and when you find the source, don't disturb anything. Secure the area, radio me, and I'll meet you there. Ash, do you copy?"

"Gotcha, boss. We're done here. I'll meet you inside. Should we plant our own audio and video equipment?" Ash asked expectantly.

"Yeah." James sighed. He didn't want Rainne to think they were spying on her, but it was imperative that they know if the stalker returned. "Get the equipment from the bus and meet me inside. We're done here."

As James entered the warehouse, he could hear the band discussing music.

"We should warm up with a cover," Markus, the drummer, piped in. "Just for shits 'n' giggles."

"Oh!" Rainne jumped. "What about that SR-71 tune, 'Mosquito'? It seems fitting," she said, cocking her eyebrow and pursing her lips.

"Cool! I can play the tambourine!" Annie bounced in sheer excitement.

"That sounds okay," Joel said.

"Does everyone know it?" Rainne asked.

A round of "yeah" filled the room. "All right, Joel, start us off." Electric guitar shattered the air seconds later, and James's attention went to Ash as he entered the building.

\* \* \* \*

As the song began, Rainne watched James and Ash intently, as did the other band members. Rainne exchanged knowing glances with Annie, who mouthed, "We have to talk later." After the song wrapped up, Rainne went into the guitar riff for the song she had been working on, teaching it to Joel. Markus added his own idea of drums into the tune, and they fiddled with it until they got the okay signal from James that meant they could stop playing.

As Rainne put down her guitar and picked up her beer, Annie

grabbed her arm and jerked her into the backroom.

“Okay, spill!” she yelled, closing the door behind her.

“I did! I spilled my beer!” Rainne yelled back. “That’s alcohol abuse.” Her tone turned sarcastic.

Annie threw Rainne a mock angry look and sat them both down on one of the beds that had been placed around the room. “Don’t be coy with me. You slept with him. Don’t lie either. I can tell by the way he’s been eyeing you since he sauntered in here.”

Rainne arched her eyebrow. “Sauntered? Do people still do that nowadays?” she asked sarcastically. “And he’s not eyeing me. Stop imagining things.”

Annie leaned forward and playfully slapped her on the thigh. “That bright red face tells me that I’m not imagining anything, and he is eyeing you.” Her eyes widened in excitement. “Like a steak.”

Rainne knew she was caught. Annie had a sixth sense about people. Bowing her head, Rainne fought with the humiliation that washed over her. “I really do *not* want to talk about it,” she whispered.

“What’s wrong, mama? Did he hurt you?” Her voice rose sharply. “Cause I will fuck him up!” The conviction in her voice made Rainne smile in appreciation.

“No, it’s not that. His team walked in on us this morning. I pretended to be asleep. They were laughing. James sent them out right away, but they probably just went to their bus to divvy up the bet pool for how long it took him to bed me.” Rainne was desperately trying to blink back her tears, but wasn’t having much luck. It had been humiliating to hear them laughing and snickering at her.

Annie almost looked angry at that declaration. “You have got to stop listening to your mother!” she said sternly. “So!” Teasing her now, Annie wagged her eyebrows. “How was it?”

Rainne flushed, rolling her eyes. “I don’t know?” Wiping the tears away with the palms of her hands, she tried to pull herself together.

Annie’s mouth dropped open as she gasped. “Yes, you do!”

“Do you want another beer?” Rainne was desperate to get away from this conversation.

“Yes, but we’re not done talking about this.” She shook her finger at her.

Exiting the room, the women noticed James and Ash huddled in the corner, talking quietly to each other. James caught Rainne’s glance and motioned her over. “We need to talk about something.” He glanced over her shoulder to the curious eyes of the band. “In private.”

She led the two men into the back room, and again the door was closed. “Now what? I don’t like the looks.” Wagging her finger between the two of them, she puckered her lips.

“We found some disturbing things during the search this morning.” Ash started with a somber mask on his face. “Your stalker has had this place wired for months. He’s been recording the warehouse and the parking lot.”

Rainne was stunned, but she fought to keep her features composed. “Recording? L...Like audio?” she stuttered as she lazily fell back onto one of the beds.

James cleared his throat. “He has every square inch of this place on tape and audio. We found all the listening devices and the cameras. We were able to track the digital signal that the camera’s receiver was sending out.” James took a seat on the bed across from her and continued. “We’re going to the destination of the signal to check it out. The rest of the team is waiting for us there. We need you to stay here until we get back.”

Rainne opened her mouth to rebuke his idea. She was cut off by Ash. “We have our own security system in place. You’re totally safe here. We’ll be alerted if anything should happen.”

“We shouldn’t be long. Don’t walk outside for anything. Wait for me to come and get you.” James motioned for Ash to leave the room.

When the door closed behind his friend, James took her hand and raised them both to their feet, he scooped Rainne against his chest.

Lifting her from the floor, he invaded her with a kiss she was sure would set them both ablaze. “You were so sexy with that guitar in your hands,” he admitted breathlessly as he set her gently on her feet.

Rainne felt the blush flame her face as she lowered her head. She racked her brain for a snappy comeback, and coming up short, she tilted her head up to look into his eyes. “How long will you be?” She tried to sound uncaring, but it came out a little too breathy for her liking.

“I’m not sure. If you need something till we get back, will Annie go get it for you?” he asked, feeling bad about leaving her here, but he’d be damned if she was going to see the hell Alton found.

\* \* \* \*

“The warehouse is fully stocked, clothes, food, linen. Even the bathrooms work. I’ll be fine.” She nodded confidently. At least she hoped she would be.

“Okay. We’ll be back as soon as possible. I’m speed dial two on the cell I gave you. Call if there are any problems.”

“How far away is this destination?” Her hands made the quote marks in the air on the last word.

James sighed slowly. “Two blocks,” he stated clinically. “Alton tracked the signal to another building two blocks away. He found a pretty elaborate setup, and he’s waiting on us to make his move.”

“Is my stalker there?” Her heart was pounding. She didn’t like the thought of him being so close.

“No.” Answering quickly, “He has been there. We believe he intends to return.” Leaning forward, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders, burying his face in her hair. “I have to go.”

Rainne took note of how sad he sounded. “See you soon.” She flashed him a smile.

“Try to get some sleep. I’ll wake you up when we get back.” James seized her chin and lifted her face to his, overtaking her mouth

with a kiss.

Rainne was overwhelmed by the flood of his passion. She couldn't control her thoughts or her hands. She clutched his shoulders as his immense hands came around her waist. "You have to go," she said in a whispered tone as she broke off the kiss, before he could disintegrate her. "Go, so you can get back." Turning on her heel, she led them out of the room. She had to get away from him before she stripped him down and assaulted him.



## Chapter 10

James had never found walking through doorways challenging, until now. Each step he took away from Rainne seemed to add another lead weight to his ankle. He was an olio of emotions. He needed to protect her just as badly as he needed to catapult her to the bed and assail her body. God, she was so cloying, he swore she'd give him a cavity. He had meant to peck her on the forehead, but one look into those angelic eyes, and he was swept away.

Rounding the corner and spotting his team on the street, James was instantly on edge. He didn't like the expressions on the faces he was seeing.

"What's wrong?" he asked, knowing there was something they hadn't told him. He could feel it in the air, like walking through melted butter.

Alton stepped forward. "I looked into the county records." He stammered, like he didn't want to finish his thought. "We found out who owns the building." Lowering his head, he wiped the sweat off his brow. "It's Phillip McCray."

James was awash with thoughts of murder. If Phillip McCray was aiding this situation, he'd kill him with his bare hands. James struggled to calm himself. It wouldn't do anyone any good for him to lose his temper. "First things first, let's get inside. We'll deal with Phillip later."

The party filed into the repository and into a large back room. It was completely empty of furniture except for a large table centered in the middle of the floor and a collection of sophisticated camera equipment set up in the corner. A rather impressive computer with all

the accessories adorned the tabletop. Scattered around it were stacks of manila folders, CDs, and local city maps. Countless pictures, newspaper articles, and promotional flyers for Rainne's band decorated the walls, making it almost impossible to tell what color the room was.

They immediately sprung into action. Ash placed hidden cameras around the entire building. Sam was wiring the warehouse for audio. Riley had disappeared back to the bus to make certain that all computer systems would pick up the signals from their spy equipment and to watch the outside so they could finish their work undisturbed. Alton was hacking into the computer and uploading the entire contents to the computer on the bus. Able and James sifted through the assortment of papers on the table, taking pictures of them so they could examine them more closely at a later date.

James was disturbed by the array of material this guy had on Rainne. Her entire life was in front of him. The local maps marked every place she had visited in the last year, along with dates, times, and frequency of visit. The files contained information on her clients, friends, and family. He had endless lists and stats on her, what she wore, liked, disliked, ate, bought, and sold. Most disturbing were the photos on the walls. It appeared he had photographed her every time he saw her. Some were of her onstage with the band, while others were her shopping at various stores. He had her at work, home, and everywhere in between.

"Let's finish up here," James growled. "I'm not sure how much more of this I can stomach."

Moments later, Ash and Sam entered the room. "We're finished, boss," Sam said absently as he and Ash picked up cameras and started cataloging the stacks in front of them.

Alton rubbed his face exhaustedly. "Be done in a minute, James." A few clicks of the keyboard later, Alton exited out and shut down the computer.

The men finished up and arranged the table much as they had

found it. Exiting the warehouse, they filed onto the bus.

“Have you called the cops yet?” Sam asked.

Outwardly scoffing, James looked at Sam as if he had two heads. “No. When I spoke with the police chief, he admitted that they were at a loss with this case. He told me to inform him if we needed backup, but other than that we are on our own.”

“Thank god!” Ash praised. “Nothin’ I hate more than overzealous police.”

The bus erupted in snickers. They all knew how Ash had authority issues. Hell, they all did. That’s why they all worked together. No one else would have them.

“Let’s give McCray a visit,” James said with a sneer. “It’s getting late.”

\* \* \* \*

*Yeah, we’re in the right place. It’s cold, sterile, and impersonal, just like her mother,* James thought as they entered the office building of Stanton Enterprises.

“We’re here to see Phillip McCray,” Alton said as they approached the receptionist’s desk.

The rotund woman peered up from her typing and paled. “Do you have an appointment?” she asked, noticeably apprehensive.

James smiled at the woman. “Tell him the CEO of HC Enterprises is here for a meeting.” He handed her his business card.

Slightly trembling, she pulled the phone from the receiver. “Mr. McCray? You have some people waiting in the lobby to see you.”

On the other line they could hear Phillip melting down on the woman in front of them. “God, he’s such a bully,” Ash murmured to the guys.

“Sir, he claims to be the CEO of HC Enterprises. I think you may want to take this meeting.” Looking over the men, she swallowed nervously. “He looks menacing, sir,” she whispered into the receiver.

Hanging up the phone, she said, "He'll be down momentarily. Please have a seat. Can I get you anything?"

"Phillip McCray will be more than enough, thank you," Sam said.

Several minutes had passed when the elevator numbers slowly started to work their way down to the first floor. When the doors opened, James had the pleasure of watching Phillip McCray pale, noticeably. James had to work to keep the hard look on his face. He had purposely brought all of them to intimidate him. He knew it was childish, but he couldn't help it. He was dying to see that look on his face.

"What can I do for you gentlemen?" Plastering a fake smile on his face, he was visibly uncomfortable.

James cleared his throat. "We need to speak with you, in private."

"Whatever about?" he scoffed arrogantly. "We don't have any business to discuss."

"Actually, we do," James growled. "It's in reference to Ms. Stanton."

A knowing look crossed Phillip's face, and without a word he led the group to a conference room off to the side. When the door closed, Phillip turned to the group and grinned. "So has Rainne sent you to inform me that she has finally come to her senses? Or have you come to inform me that she's been throwing herself at you? Frankly, neither would surprise me. It's about time for the first, and as far as the second? Well..." Pausing, he looked at James with contempt. "She always was one for fraternizing with the help."

James lurched forward. He had every intention of throwing his pompous ass through the nearest wall when he felt Alton's hand push flat against his chest and saw him step between them.

"Mr. McCray, this is about the warehouse you own on the 1800 block of Ford Street here in Fort Myers." Alton always was the peacemaker of the group. He was excellent at blurting things out, and calming the situation before James could rebuke his action.

"Why yes, I do. It's one of the many real estate investments I've

made,” he stated proudly. “Why?”

“Who is the renter?” Alton asked, obviously getting as annoyed with him as James was.

“Why would you need to know that?” he asked, sounding almost nervous.

“We ran across something in our investigation that led us to that warehouse,” Alton informed him coolly.

“I’d have to check my records.” He smiled coyly. “I have many renters. It may take a few days.”

Exhaling slowly, a sinister grin crept onto James’s face. “That’s okay, *Phil*. We have all the time in the world. We’ll just make ourselves nice and cozy in your front lobby.” He held his expression as he watched Phillip mentally unhinge in disbelief.

Turning on his heel, Phillip opened the conference room door and bellowed. “Ms. White! Get me the file on the Ford Street property.”

After several minutes of Phillip standing with his back to them agitatedly tapping his foot, Ms. White approached him with the file. He snatched it out of her hands and proceeded to slam the door in the poor, flustered woman’s face. Spinning in place, he slammed the folder on the large, polished oak table. Throwing himself into a chair, he sighed heavily.

Picking the file up off the table, James glared at him. “Do you really feel it necessary to act like that?”

Phillip snorted arrogantly as a wide smile appeared on his face.

“Wow! No wonder Rainne thinks you’re such a tool.” He laughed quietly.

Leaning forward and placing his elbows on the desk, he said, “Rainne can think whatever she likes because once I get my hands on that unpolished cow, she’ll know who runs the show. I don’t need my women to think. Rainne rarely does that anyway.” He rolled his eyes in disdain.

James handed the file to Alton and lunged at Phillip again, this time grabbing him by the throat. He lifted him out of the chair and

bashed him against the wall. The sound radiated around the room like a blast. “You come near Rainne again, and it will be the last action you ever perform,” James hissed in his face.

“You’re choking me!” Phillip’s words were barely audible.

“I’ll do more than that if I ever see you lay a hand on her again. Stay away from her!” An animalistic growl resonated from James’s chest as he uttered the threat. Releasing him, James stepped back as Phillip hit the floor gagging and coughing.

Slowly composing himself, Phillip’s face twisted, and a sinister laugh filled the room. “I own that bitch! She’s already been promised to me by her mother. She’s mine!” he yelled.

“You can’t stand her! Why are you fighting so hard?” James couldn’t comprehend.

“I’d never turn down what was mine! This company, the money, and Rainne. They all belong to me. I intend to collect. As soon as you and your men finish this job, I can get on with my plan to marry her.”

James felt like he was drowning in fury. He’d be damned if Rainne would marry this insignificant piece of shit. “She’ll never marry you, Phillip. She’s made it very clear to me she wants nothing to do with you, this company, or her mother’s money.”

“Oh, she’ll come around. Carol can be very persuasive.” There he went with that evil grin again. James was thinking he needed a mustache to twirl.

His eyebrows arched sarcastically. “Right. You’ll get this back when we’re finished.” Taking the file from Alton’s hands, the team stalked out of the room. If he stayed here another second, Rainne would never have to worry about Phillip again...He would be dead.

## Chapter 11

After the band left, Rainne was compelled to clean the warehouse. It wasn't terribly messy, but it needed a good once-over. Turning on the flat screen, she put in a DVD of *It's a Wonderful Life*. It was her favorite old movie. She listened to it in the background while she straightened. She made sure all the beds had clean sheets on them for the guys in case they decided to sleep there. Preheating the oven to 350 degrees, she threw in a frozen dish of chicken parmesan and got out the plates. Moving towards the bathroom, she checked the towels and toiletries in stock. Since the place seemed ready for company, she decided to take a shower.

Rainne made her way towards the chest of drawers in the bedroom after her shower. They all had their own drawers filled with clothes. She chose her black boxer shorts with a camouflage T-shirt. Getting a glass of water, she sat to watch the rest of the movie until the chicken was done. After making sure the oven and television were turned off, she covered the dish with foil and headed to bed.

\* \* \* \*

Walking into the warehouse, the team set down their gear. Noticing the food on the counter, James figured they'd put their stuff away later. Making his way to one of the back rooms to find Rainne, he was stopped by Alton.

"Are we crashing here tonight?" he asked, his mouth full of chicken.

"Well, it's in here or on the bus." James didn't turn to face him.

“Cool.” He could hear the smile in Alton’s voice.

Opening the door to the first room, the anticipation James felt welling up in his chest was instantly squelched when he didn’t see her. Closing the door, he strolled back across the room to the other end. “You all are sleeping in that room.” Pointing in the direction he’d just come from, ignoring the knowing snickers from his men, James opened the door, instantly wanting to howl in victory.

She was sprawled out on the bed, her face relaxed, her breathing even. He crept closer. Taking his boots off, he unbuttoned his pants, pausing as she shifted slightly. He examined her face. He’d never get over how innocent she appeared. She was easily the most innocent woman he’d ever been with. It made him burn. Her innocence inflamed him. He wanted to teach her everything. He wanted to touch her everywhere, do things to her he’d never dreamed of doing with anyone. Removing the rest of his clothes and slipping into bed beside her, he stilled as a small whimper passed her lips.

He had all intentions of cuddling up next to her and sleeping, until that sound escaped. His cock was rioting to hammer into her. Peeling back the covers, he moved between her legs. Slowly stripping down her boxer shorts, he couldn’t help but smile at the camouflage T-shirt she wore. As he threw the cloth to the floor, he marveled at how wet she was and how much harder he got witnessing the sight.

He lowered his head and proceeded to stroke her womanly folds softly with his tongue. She reminded him of the sweetest ice cream he’d ever had. It made him want to devour her as such.

A cry pierced the air as her hips jerked.

He felt her trying to move away from him. He didn’t think so. His broad hands came around her hips, and he held her firmly in place. He wanted to let her know who was in charge. He needed her to relax. It was all he could do to keep his control in check. Spearing his tongue into her tight channel, her body tensed.

She let out another scream as her juices spilled into his mouth.

He ate at her frantically, prolonging her orgasm.



She was shivering uncontrollably.

He couldn't take it anymore. Hovering above her, with his hands on either side of her head, her eyes met his. Wide with surprise and innocence, she bit her lip. "God, you taste so good."

\* \* \* \*

She couldn't do anything but whimper at his declaration. Her voice always seemed to escape her when James touched her. She pivoted her hips towards him unconsciously. She had never been so aroused. It frightened her. Every cell in her body was alive and anxious for his next move. One lick and she was his. She would have been embarrassed if she hadn't been busy clamoring for more.

His mouth was ravenous as he leaned down to her neck. With James biting and suckling her, she gripped his waist. He weighed his body onto hers, pressing her into the mattress as he rubbed the length of his shaft against the moist folds of her pussy. He captured her hands, moving them above her head, enslaving them in one of his, and tangling the other hand into her hair as he held her in place.

"You're not going anywhere, little girl." Kissing her deeply, Rainne slowly melted under him, wrapping her legs around his hips.

Rainne broke away from the kiss, continuing it down his jawline. "I want you in my mouth," she whispered breathlessly.

James rolled, and in one fluid movement Rainne was lying on top of him. He released her hands as she traveled down his rock-hard chest, planting kisses and bites as she went.

Rainne went slowly as she ravaged his body. She couldn't help it. He tasted so good. She never knew she could be so hungry for the taste of a man. As she came between his thighs, she froze. He was so huge. His shaft was long and so thick. It amazed her how thick. She wasn't sure she could fit it all into her mouth. She'd never done oral before, so she wasn't sure where to start.

Poking her tongue out, she slowly licked his balls in an ice cream

cone fashion. He flinched, and she heard the low groan escape his chest. Trying not to smile, she continued up his shaft to the bulbous head. She could feel every vein in his cock with her tongue. His hands tangled in her hair as she enclosed her mouth around the head of his dick. She moved her tongue in circles, tasting the drops of pre-cum that came to her. She could feel her own juices drip down to soak her thighs as she suckled him.

\* \* \* \*

James didn't think he would survive. It was all he could do not to blow his load down her throat. It was obvious she'd never done this before, but that just made it hotter. He bucked his hips and pushed his way to the back of her throat. The moan she uttered nearly had him undone. Her tongue swiped in a back and forth motion down his shaft, lapping at him.

Sitting up, he pulled her hair so she could face him. Her face was crimson, and she was licking her lips. "I want some more," she whispered.

"Oh, baby, you keep that up and I'm a goner." Moving his hands to her waist, he gingerly positioned her to her stomach, balancing his weight on his elbow. Reaching around the front of her torso, he milked her clit with his thumb and index finger. She was sopping wet for him.

"God! James!"

"You want that cock, baby?" he asked her in a low, seductive voice.

"Yes! James, please! Yes!" She was panting frantically.

Opening her thighs with his, he gripped the shaft of his cock and slowly eased it into her.

She whimpered. Raising her hips, she bucked, trying to take more of his girth.

He sank himself into her until he was buried balls deep. Stretching

her, he felt every muscle strain against him as she cried out beneath him. Slowly, he moved. He didn't want to rip her open, she was so tight. Too tight.

He could feel her pussy relax around him, getting wetter. "You're so close, baby."

"James!" she cried. "Please! Fuck me! I can't take it!"

James grasped her hips and pulled them both up onto their knees, never pulling free from her grip. He pushed her shoulders down to the mattress. "Just relax, baby. I've got you." He pulled back, almost exiting her channel, and slammed into her.

Her pussy strangled his shaft, feeling her tighten up around him. He licked the pad of his thumb and slowly circled the tight muscle of her anus. She stilled for a moment. James reveled in the moan that drifted through the air. He felt her juices dripping down, soaking his balls. "Good girl. Come for me, baby."

She pushed against him, taking him deeper inside her, and cried out.

James lost his mind. He stretched her anus with first one finger, then another. Her muscles were milking his digits. Her low moans quickly turned into screams of pleasure as she tightened around him. James felt Rainne's orgasm rush over his strained cock and drip down, drenching his thighs. Her body quaked. Before her tremors subsided, James flipped her quickly to her back. He propped her ass up on a pillow and pressed his thumb pad against her clit. Lifting her legs to his shoulders, he ran the head of his huge cock over her pussy and down over her virgin ass. Her eyes widened in surprise. "James!" she cried.

"Shh, baby, it's okay." He pressed hard on both her clit and the untried muscles of her ass. Rainne screamed out as he nudged the head of his dick inside her and stilled. "Fuck, baby." The words strangled through his lips. He inched his way in, fighting the need take her. Hard. When he was buried inside her, overflowing her, he froze. He wasn't going to last but a minute like this if he moved.

She was panting feverishly. He held her hips still when she tried to buck against him. “Baby, I’m so close! Please!” she pleaded.

James moved back casually as he groaned her name. When she came, it was like an explosion. She held on to his forearms and screamed through it.

James felt her tighten once more, and he lost all control. He pumped inside her vigorously and filled her with his seed. It seemed never ending. Sweat pouring down his face, he was only vaguely aware of his own shout mingling with hers.

Still buried inside her tender hole, he covered her body with his own. Capturing her lips in a kiss, he cupped her head with his broad hands. Breaking the kiss, he moved slowly down her jawline, caressing her skin with his mouth. “I love you, Rainne.” He couldn’t stop the words or the emotion he felt welling up in his chest.

\* \* \* \*

“I love you, too.” Embarrassment flowed over her. Her first thought was that he’d just said it in the heat of the moment. Rainne was baffled at the easiness of the uttered phrase. She’d never felt like this before and was amazed that it didn’t scare her. She knew she loved him, trusted him. She trusted him with everything she had. She just didn’t trust him to stay with her. She figured she’d enjoy him while she could and deal with the shattered pieces of herself when he left. For tonight, she allowed herself to be happy.

Rainne felt James’s cock slip from her grip. He rolled onto his side and pulled her close. “Sleep, kitten. We’ll talk in the morning.”

“Hmm.” Rainne yawned into his chest as she closed her eyes and drifted. All she could hear was the sound of his heartbeat lulling her to sleep like the sweetest lullaby she’d ever heard.

## **Chapter 12**

The silence of the morning was shattered by the slamming of the bedroom door and a bloodcurdling screech. “Rainne!”

Spiking up in bed and scrambling to cover herself, Rainne observed her mother standing at the foot of the bed, arms crossed across her chest, tapping her foot.

“I knew it!” she screamed. “You little whore! Get dressed. You’re coming with me!”

“Mom.” Rainne couldn’t find her voice in the waves of humiliation she felt engulfed in.

Carol pointed her finger angrily at Rainne. “You shut up!”

Carol turned on James and continued her irate barrage. “You! You’re fired! Get out!” She shook her finger at him.

Rainne and James clamored out of bed, struggling to get their boxer shorts on.

“You can’t come in here and order people around. This isn’t your warehouse!” she shot back angrily.

Carol stepped forward and slapped her across the face. “Get dressed,” she hissed through clenched teeth. “After what this piece of shit did to Phillip last night and now?” Waving her arms wildly, her voice raised a few octaves.

James stormed forward.

Rainne could see the murder in his eyes. Jumping between the two of them and throwing her hands up in the air, she cried, “Don’t! You can’t talk to her when she’s like this.”

James stomped out of the room.

Rainne watched as James slammed the bedroom door behind him.

She swore she could hear her heart shatter in her chest. She fought a losing battle with the tears that streamed down her cheeks.

“Stop your crying!” Carol snapped. “Get some clothes on, and let’s go. Phillip’s waiting on us.”

“I don’t love him, Mother.” Rainne whispered.

“Who cares about love, Rainne? The McCrays are the best-bred family on this side of the country. You will marry him!” she bellowed.

“No, I won’t!” Rainne screamed at her. “You can’t make me! I hate him! I love James!”

Carol froze. “You think you love him?” she questioned sarcastically, arching an eyebrow. “Stupid girl.” She laughed. “Besides, what makes you think he could ever love you? Did he tell you that?” she asked mockingly. “Men will say anything to get into a woman’s pants. Get dressed. I don’t have time for your little girl crap right now.” She scoffed. “Besides, this is what your father would have wanted.”

“Daddy would’ve wanted me to marry someone I love,” Rainne informed her coldly through her tears. This could not be happening.

Carol stepped forward to grip her chin firmly. “You listen and listen well, little girl. Your father wanted this marriage to happen,” she informed her coldly. “He had planned on it since you were a child. The McCrays have already given their blessings, and it *is* happening. Now get your things.” Releasing her face, she turned on her heel and exited the room.

Rainne was crushed. Her heart screamed for her not to listen. Her brain and her lack of self-esteem, on the other hand, told her she was right. Rainne was embarrassed she’d told him she loved him last night. She had thought later he would have taken it back when he left, or pulled out the love-you-like-a-friend speech. It was the truth, though, and she couldn’t lie to herself. James was leaving. He’d been fired, and he had no reason to stay now.

Her brain swam with doubt as she picked up her clothes and

headed towards the bathroom. She couldn't go with her mother. She would be married to Phillip by sundown for sure. She couldn't be with James. Surely he didn't want her and all her baggage.

Tying her shoe, Rainne sighed heavily. Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she knew she had to go. She never liked to run, but what other choice did she have? She needed time to figure this mess out.

Opening the bathroom door, she crept to the doors that led to the back alley. Letting it click quietly behind her, she set off running down the street.

Peeking around the corner, she spied her mother's limo in the parking lot. She and Phillip were standing next to it talking.

Rainne turned swiftly and headed in the opposite direction. Rushing through the alley to the other street, she turned the corner, coming face to face with her stalker. Twisting around to run back the way she came, she felt a hand in her hair. Crying out, she was jerked backward, falling against his chest. Releasing her locks, he grabbed her around the waist and placed a cloth over her mouth.

She tried to scream...

\* \* \* \*

James stormed out of the bedroom just as the guys were scrambling out of theirs, guns drawn. He had to get as much distance between him and that ice bitch, Carol. He would be goddamned if he could stand around and let someone, anyone, hit his woman. James held his hands up for them to halt and said, "Rainne's mom is here. We've been fired."

"Shit!" Alton hissed. "What are you going to do?"

"Well, I'm not leaving," James said with a tone of sarcasm. "I'll try to talk to her. She wants Rainne to go with her. Now." James grimaced at the thought. He couldn't bear to let her go, not now. "I don't expect any of you to stay." Looking at his team, he waited for their decision. They were all friends, but he would never expect them

to fight his personal wars.

“Well,” Sam stepped forward, “I think I speak for all of us when I say that you’ve walked through hell for each of us at one time or another. We’re staying.” Looking around the crowd, they all nodded in agreement.

“Thanks, guys.” Walking to his duffel bag, James pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. He heard the bedroom door open and saw Carol step out into the room. She scoffed at him and went to the parking lot.

James rushed after her. “Mrs. Stanton, I don’t blame you for firing us, but I implore you, don’t take Rainne to Phillip. She doesn’t want to go,” he pleaded.

Turning on her heel, she glared at him. “Mr. Decker, my daughter doesn’t know what she wants. She is no longer your responsibility. You’ve had your fun with her. Now go.” Turning away from him, she went to step into the limo.

“I love her. I won’t let her go,” he proclaimed.

She froze in place. Pivoting to see him, she laughed. “You think I’ll let my family be embarrassed by letting my only daughter marry the help?” Her eyebrows lowered into a frown as she insulted him.

“With all due respect, Mrs. Stanton.” James’s tone turned authoritative. He squared his shoulders and glared down at her. “I’m not now, nor would I *ever* ask for your opinion. It’s up to Rainne.” James walked back into the warehouse and closed the door behind him.

Rushing to the bedroom door, he flung it open, calling her name. Pausing inside, he didn’t see her. He knocked on the bathroom door. “Rainne, please don’t go with her. I love you. The team’s not going anywhere, and neither am I.” He was met by silence. Fear slammed into him as he opened the door and saw nothing. “Shit!”

Storming out of the room, he strapped his gun holster on. “She ran!”

The team jumped into action and headed out into the parking lot, to the bus. James stomped to the limo, where Carol and Phillip were



standing.

“What did you say to her?” he yelled with a murderous glare on his face.

Carol and Phillip turned to look at him. “Well.” Carol scoffed at him, dismissively. “That’s none of your business, Mr. Decker. You and your team should be more worried about packing up and leaving before the sheriff forcibly removes you.”

James forced back his smile as the guys behind him started laughing. That thought was funny, the sheriff hauling them away. “She left,” he hissed, glaring back and forth between Carol and Phillip. He was debating who he wanted to kill more.

Carol’s face morphed into shock, and she paled. “She what? How could she have left?” The frown that shaped her lips made her look like an old hag. “Why weren’t you watching her?” she shrieked.

James threw her a sarcastic smile. “Well, we would have been watching her, but we were fired.” With that one statement, he turned on his heel and jumped on the bus, followed by his team. *Dammit, I knew she’d run. I should have stopped her. I shouldn’t have left her alone with Carol.* James mentally beat himself up for not stopping her. He knew she was emotionally fragile. He had seen the destruction Carol had done to her, yet he had left her alone with that viper. He had to find her, he had to. When he did he would never let her go again.

Alton turned on the laptop. “I’ve got a signal on her. She’s about ten miles north of here and moving fast,” he informed them.

Riley jumped into the driver’s seat and peeled out of the parking lot.

Sitting shotgun, James could see Carol and Phillip race into the warehouse. “Hey, Ash, pull up the audio and video on the warehouse for me.” James moved to the main compartment of the vehicle to watch the monitors. He just couldn’t resist hearing what they had to say.

“That girl, I swear! We need to get her back! If she dies or

disappears, our plan is moot!” Carol breathed exasperatedly. “I knew something like this would happen. Jason was a fool for leaving the company to Rainne. If something happens to her before we get control of her shares, the company reverts to the board and we go to jail for fraud. I will not forsake everything I’ve worked for!” she shrieked.

“That’s not going to happen. I’ve informed the sheriff’s department, and they’re on the lookout. Don’t worry, Carol, as soon as we get her back, I’ll marry her and take control of her shares. We’ll split them. I’ll divorce her, and we can have everything we’ve ever dreamed of, baby.” Phillip pulled Carol close and captured her mouth in a kiss.

“Oh!” The team howled in unison.

“That is the most messed up thing I’ve ever witnessed,” James said in disbelief. “Why play Rainne? She doesn’t want that company. I’m sure she’d sign it over if they asked.” Running his hands over his face, he was a mix of disgust and disbelief.

“I don’t know. Those two have no morals, that I’ve seen anyway,” Ash said.

“The signal stopped. ETA is thirty minutes,” Sam informed the crew.

James paused to take a deep breath. Keeping his composure was crucial. She was hurting. He had to keep his head to help her. It was imperative that he stamp down his anger. This would be the last time she’d run from him. He’d make sure of that.

Closing in on the signal, Riley pulled the bus over. The crew filed out of the vehicle and moved slowly up the practically deserted street.

Looking at his handheld receiver, Alton looked perplexed. “She should be within twenty feet of us.”

The guys stopped and looked around. They were in front of an empty lot. James spotted something lying on the ground about ten feet into the lot.

“There,” he said pointing to the object. The team ran up to the

spot and James bent down. “It’s her purse.” Looking inside it, James’s heart sank. It was full. Nothing was missing. “He snatched her.”

“Does she still have the phone?” Alton asked, confused.

“It’s the only thing missing. She either left it in the warehouse, or it’s turned off.” James was racking his brain for their next move. She could be anywhere. Just then his phone buzzed at his hip. Taking it from the clip, he glanced down at the number. “It’s her.”

## Chapter 13

Rainne slowly opened her eyes. It was hard to see with the blurriness and blinding headache. Shaking her head quickly, her eyes slowly cleared. She focused on the figure in front of her.

Directly across from her was her stalker. He sat in a chair smiling at her patiently.

Rainne attempted to lean forward and move but quickly realized she was bound to the chair she sat in. Her ankles were tied to each leg of the chair and her hands were cuffed behind her back. Panic set in as she began to struggle fiercely. “Who are you? What do you want from me?”

In a very loving voice, he cooed, “Don’t fight, princess you’ll bruise yourself. I do apologize for the restraints. You deserve better than this, I admit.” He shrugged casually. “I was afraid you would flee before I had a chance to explain myself. We really haven’t even been properly introduced.” He stood from his chair and bent in a regal bow towards her. Coming down on one knee, he leaned in close. “My name is Cameron Ellis. I am at your service, m’lady.”

Rainne was battling the rising terror threatening to make her lose control. “What do you want, Cameron?” She was relieved that her voice sounded calm.

“You, my beautiful little freak.” He reached up and stroked her cheek. “I’ve been watching you for some time now, and I want to take you away from everything, that mother who doesn’t appreciate you, Phillip, everything.” His lips twisted into an angry frown. “Especially James. He’s not good for you, Rainne. He could never love you like I do.”

*Oh, my god! This guy is a nut-job.* She knew she had to play this just right. He was riding the edge of madness. “James is gone. He left,” she said, making careful eye contact with him.

“Why?” His eyes narrowed as if she were trying to trick him.

“My mother fired him. It’s really for the best. I mean, he was hired to find you, and now that I’ve met you, I don’t need him anymore.” Rainne wasn’t sure if he could see her trembling.

“That’s right, baby. You have me now. I’ll take care of you.” He flashed a smile. “You belong to me, Rainne. You always have.”

“How long have you been trying to contact me, Cameron?” She had to know where he came from. If she could keep him talking, maybe he would keep his cool.

“Over a year, since I started the Noise Box fan club.” He announced proudly, “I heard your band play at Tuesday’s Pub over a year ago. I knew you were sending me messages through your songs, Rainne. We’re meant to be together.” Sitting back down in the chair across from her, he leaned forward and slowly caressed her thighs.

“Why did you attack me at my mother’s party?”

“I’m sorry about that, my love. I lost my temper. I got so jealous when I saw you with Phillip. You refused my invitation and then ran to him.” He growled. “You needed to be reminded of who owns you. I will never tolerate you being a whore and letting another man touch you.” The look on his face chilled her to the bone. “I would’ve preferred you coming to me of your own accord, but it seems I must force your hand in this instance. You will learn in time that it is all for the best.”

Rainne tested the give on her handcuffs, trying to reach her back pocket. “Where’s Merlyn, Cameron? I miss him.” She tried to make her face appear heartbroken.

“Oh, Angel, Merlyn’s just fine. He’s at my house.” The look of innocence on his face just about made her sick to her stomach.

“What’s your plan, Cameron? I mean you have me here, tied to a chair.” Looking down at herself, she asked, “What now?”

Cocking his head to one side, he appeared deep in thought. “Well, I guess that all depends on you.”

“On me? What do you mean?”

“What do you want to do? Where do you want to go?” He leaned forward and placed his elbows on his knees.

Rainne had a stroke of genius. “I think we need to go as far away as we can get. I want to leave this whole state behind. We can start fresh somewhere that neither of us has ever been.” She widened her eyes as she plastered an excited smile on her face.

He smiled at her, his face a mask of affection. “That was exactly what I was thinking, princess.” Leaning closer to her, he gently kissed her cheek. “I knew we would be on the same page.”

She gave him her most earnest smile. “Cameron, we need to get my things and Merlyn. We can’t forget Merlyn.”

His eyes narrowed. “That’s not possible. You’ll run away, I won’t let you go, Rainne! Never!” His voice rose sharply on the last word.

Rainne flinched at the snarl that formed his words. Giving him a playful look and arching her eyebrow. “Cameron, where am I going to go?” She yanked on her restraints to assure him they were secure. “I couldn’t get up if my life depended on it. You go get Merlyn and meet me back here. If you want to stop at my apartment and grab me some clothes, that’s okay. If not, that’s okay, too. I can’t leave Merlyn, though.” She flashed him her best doe-eyed pout.

He studied her for a long moment. “Okay, I’ll be back. I’m only getting the cat, though. We can buy you more clothes on the road.” Standing from his chair, he grabbed the back of it and dragged it to the far wall, out of the way.

Rainne curved a sexy smile with her lips and looked up at him. “Mmm, shopping.”

Cameron strolled back to Rainne, leaned down, and captured her face with his hands. “I love you.” He pressed his lips to hers.

Rainne could feel her heart pound in her chest. She tried desperately to return his kiss earnestly. She also tried not to throw up

on him. When he broke off the kiss, she smiled shyly at him. "I love you, too. Now hurry back to me so I don't have a chance to miss you."

"Back in a flash, princess," he said over his shoulder as he exited the room.

Rainne held her breath until she heard his car start up outside and pull away. She reached down and with two fingers pulled her cell phone out of her back pocket.

Pressing a button, she didn't hear the tone, realizing that it must have gotten shut off. She pressed and held the off button until she heard the welcome tone that signaled the phone was on. Waiting a second or two for the phone to turn completely on, she pressed and held the number two. When the tone quieted, she spoke.

\* \* \* \*

James slid the phone open. "Rainne, where are you?"

"James! Help me! He just left. He'll be back soon. I'm tied to a chair. I'm in some kind of warehouse."

"I got a signal on her," Alton called out, looking up from the handheld receiver.

Racing back to the bus, James couldn't tear the phone from his ear. As long as he could hear her voice, he knew she was all right. "How far, Alton?" James growled, angry he couldn't make time go faster.

"ETA twenty minutes, James." Alton looked up from directing Riley on where to go.

"Fuck that noise!" They heard Riley from the driver's seat. "I'll have us there in ten!" With that sentiment, they felt the bus jolt forward.

"Let's get suited up." The order came as James pulled on his bulletproof vest and checked the clip in his weapon. James paused to take a deep breath. Keeping his composure was crucial. If she got

hurt, he had to keep his head to help her.

Ignoring the tremors flowing through him, he spoke. "Okay, men. When we get there, fan out. Everybody got their headsets?" Glancing back to see the acknowledgement, he also saw the concern on their faces. He drew another deep breath. "We get her out, first and foremost. Whoever gets to her first gets her out. The rest of us will deal with him. Understood?"

"We got it. Don't worry, man. We'll get her back unscathed. Promise," Able said solemnly.

James sat back and tried to no avail to relax. He could do nothing but listen to Rainne's voice grow more desperate.

"James! God, please help me!" She sobbed uncontrollably. "He just left. He'll be back soon. James, please hurry. I'm tied to a chair. I'm in some kind of warehouse."

She stopped talking. Her fear was taking over. "I'm coming, baby," he whispered. After a few minutes, he heard her snuffle and sigh. Then in a tiny voice, through broken sobs, she started to sing.

"You and me have a disease, you affect me, you infect me, I'm afflicted, you're addicted, you and me, you and me." She was sighing heavily and sniffling, her voice sounded strangled. "James, please be coming."

James's control was teetering. "ETA, Alton!" he bellowed.

"One minute," Alton answered quickly. The bus skidded to a stop in an industrial area. "She's within fifty yards."

\* \* \* \*

Rainne was losing hope and fast. Telling herself not to panic seemed to have the opposite effect on her as she slipped into despair. Her eyes were beginning to burn from her mascara. Her wrists and ankles were sore from tugging on the restraints. She could feel the bruises beginning to form around the rope burns, and her hands were wet, she assumed from blood trickling down them. "Stop crying," she



told herself out loud, angrily. “This is not how you want to die.” Rainne took a deep breath and strained to look around the room. Nothing, just her, the chair, and walls. Thinking she could break the chair, she started to jerk violently from side to side. The chair finally teetered and, in what seemed like slow motion, fell to the side. The last thing she heard was the sound of her own scream at the sharp pains that radiated from her body as she and the chair toppled to the floor.

\* \* \* \*

James and his team surged through the front doors of the warehouse, fanning out, and guns drawn. Once inside, he took the lead. “Spread out,” he ordered. The team split up into two groups. Ash kicked in the closest door to them and jerked around the corner, weapon steady in front of him. “Clear,” he announced. Tracing the wall with their backs, they made their way to the next door. James gave the door one swift kick, but it did little in the way of opening it. Raising his firearm, he shot at the handle, assuming it was locked. Giving the door another jolt with his boot, it flew open.

Poising his gun to shoot, James froze. “Clear,” he heard Able confirm, but James could see nothing but her. She was lying on the floor motionless, crumpled into a heap on the concrete. Racing over, he was overwhelmed by emotion. “Rainne,” he shouted. Quickly assessing the situation, he saw she was bleeding from several places and unconscious.

Alton brandished a bow knife from his boot and started cutting the restraints around her ankles. James pulled out his cell and called for an ambulance. “Ash! We need the bolt cutters!” he bellowed, looking up at his crew. “We need to get her out of here. I want you all to stay behind and wait for him. He’s *not* getting away. Not after this,” James said through his teeth. “Riley, go move the bus. I’m taking her out back.”

As gently as he could, James scooped her up from the cement floor. She felt like a rag doll in his arms. As he exited the warehouse into the back alley, he could see the ambulance rounding the corner.

The ride to the hospital was the longest ride of his existence. He was forced to sit up front so the paramedics could work on her. Arriving at the hospital, she still hadn't regained consciousness.

Walking through the doors, James was met by a rotund nurse who looked like she didn't like her job very much. "Sir, you will have to wait in the waiting area," she ordered.

Over his dead body. "I'm her husband," he said quickly.

She eyed Rainne and sighed. "Fine, but you'll have to wait in the hall."

James took a chair in the hall and listened intently to the doctors and nurses rush around Rainne. He was desperately trying to be calm, but he needed to see her.

After what seemed like days, a gentleman walked out of the room and approached him. "I'm Dr. Johnston. Are you the husband of that young lady?" He looked angry.

James stood from his seat. "Yes. I am. James Decker. How is she?" James tried to keep his voice calm, but he felt like he was being strangled.

Blowing out a hard breath, he looked through his chart, shaking his head. "Not good, Mr. Decker. What happened to her?"

James knew that look. The doctor thought James had done something to her. "She was kidnapped earlier today. I'm also her personal bodyguard." He handed the doctor a business card. "She's had a stalker for over a year. My team is actually trying to subdue him as we speak."

"Well, Mr. Decker, she has a concussion. She'll need some stitches to her scalp. Her left shoulder is dislocated," he explained without emotion. "Her wrists and ankles are severely burned from what appear to be restraint marks." He waited for an explanation.

"Yes. She was tied to a chair with her hands and feet bound. She

had ropes around her ankles, and her hands were cuffed behind her.” James had to take a steadying breath. He felt light-headed.

The doctor’s composure faltered for a swift moment as his eyebrows rose in disbelief. Clearing his throat and referring back to the chart in his hands, he continued. “Well, Mr. Decker, she gave it one hell of a fight. Her wrists and ankles are bloody. We’re going to bandage them and give her some antibiotics to fight off any infection that may try to set in.”

Cutting him off, James interjected, “Doctor, when will she regain consciousness?”

Closing the chart, he squared his shoulders. “We can’t know that. She could wake up any minute. She’s not in a coma. That’s the best news I can give you.” With that, he turned back into the room.

Sitting back in the chair, James flinched as he heard the loud crack of Rainne’s shoulder being relocated. *She’ll be happy she missed that*, he thought. As he sat there, his thoughts drifted. *I’m her husband*, he mused to himself. The thought made him ecstatic beyond belief. The buzz in his Bluetooth unit snapped him out of his happy place. He tapped it with his finger and answered, “ “Yeah.”

“James, we got him.” Alton’s voice came through on the other end.

“Where is he?” The need for blood almost brought James out of his seat.

“We’re on our way to the hospital now.”

“What happened?” James’s neck prickled with tension. “Is someone hurt?”

His voice was speckled with amusement. “Yeah, but it’s not one of us.”

“I’m outside ER room fourteen. See you on arrival.” James hung up and took a steadying breath, just happy his men, his friends were okay.

## Chapter 14

Waking up in the hospital was something Rainne wouldn't wish on her worst enemy. When she snapped out of unconsciousness, a myriad of questions flew through her mind. *Why is it so dark? Why aren't I cold? Hadn't the warehouse been drafty? The warehouse! Cameron!*

Her eyes flew open as she jolted upright in bed. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest. She felt like she was drowning despite the fact that she was desperately gasping for air.

She was only distantly aware of someone screaming as she felt large hands holding her, pushing her down. Struggling fiercely against them, she recognized her own scream.

"Rainne! Snap out of it!"

Her mind and body froze. *That voice! I know that voice! It's better than any song I've ever heard!*

Her body relaxed, and her eyes focused. Her heart tightened in her chest as she stared into James's pain-filled eyes. He was horrified. She was confused.

Her entire being froze. "James! You're here!" she gasped.

His brow dipped low into a frown. "Of course I'm here."

Suddenly his gaze shifted downward, his face twisting in shock. "Oh, shit!"

Reaching across her body, he hit the call button for the nurse. "Yes?" the sweet voice on the other end inquired.

"We need a nurse in here pronto!" he bellowed as he clamped his hand around Rainne's arm.

"What are you doing?" She looked down, puzzled. As soon as her

eyes focused on her arm, she groaned, feeling the pain whip through her body and seeing the splattered blood covering not only her and James, but the floor, as well. She had ripped out the IV. She didn't know she had in the struggle.

Her attention was instantly diverted as the door flew open and a nurse rushed into the room. "Sir, you'll have to move," she said as she approached the right side of the bed.

James reluctantly let go of her arm and came around to the other side of the bed. He bent down and gently petted her hair as she watched the nurse spring into action.

Rainne watched, wide-eyed, as she worked feverishly to stop the bleeding and inject a new IV.

James reached up and gently clasped Rainne's chin, directing her eyes towards him instead of the mess she'd made of herself.

"You don't want to watch that."

"I can't believe you came." Her voice was colored in wonderment as she drank in his features.

Swallowing, he replied, "Silly girl, why are you so shocked? Of course I came for you." His fingers caressed her cheek. "I love you, all of you, everything that you are." He took a steadying breath and leaned into her ear and continued with a whisper. "To love you, Rainne, is more natural than breathing. To feel the warmth of your body against mine is like home. Even while we're apart, you invade my senses. I feel electricity in your touch. I remember your innocent whimpers in my head. That sweet scent that resides in that soft spot between your ear and shoulder is so indescribable," he crooned softly. "The way you taste when I make love to you makes me quake with anticipation. Your kindness humbles me. Your heart makes me braver than I ever thought possible. And your eyes? I want to spend the rest of eternity lost in those beautiful eyes."

As James whispered his soul into her ear, Rainne was overcome with emotion. Her body felt as if it were being crushed by all the different feelings. She couldn't possibly process them all. *He loves*

*me*, her brain chimed with elation. It was more than she had ever dreamed of. Her entire life she had shied away from men thinking that love was something she would never be blessed with. She had never felt this way about anyone, but to know he returned her love was more than she could have ever wished for. She vowed not to let her self-doubt get in the way of this wonderful feeling. She wouldn't give in to the fears. She only wanted to revel in the knowledge that he was hers. She was his.

"All done, sweetie." The nurse's cheery voice brought her back to the surface of reality. "Now let's try not to do that again, okay?" she said with a bright smile.

Rainne nodded and tried her best to smile politely. She wasn't sure she could speak with a steady voice.

As the nurse left the room, James gently kissed her cheek and slumped back into his chair, exhausted.

"Are you okay?" she asked worriedly.

"Yeah, it's just been a hell of a couple of days, baby." His head was leaned back on the headrest of the chair, his face directed towards the ceiling. His eyes were closed as he obviously tried to control his breathing.

"Couple of days?" Her voice was laced with shock. "How long have I been out?"

"A little over twenty-four hours." Leaning forward, he placed his elbows on the bed. "I'm just glad you're awake...and alive."

There was such pain in his eyes it made her want to cry.

"There are things I need to talk to you about. The team and I have uncovered some new developments." He rubbed his hands together. "Ok, but first how did I get here and..." Rainne was interrupted when the door to her room swung open and a small group of people walked in. Three of them immediately started to clean up the splatters of blood from Rainne's panic attack.

Two other men stood at the foot of her bed assessing her. One of the men was stout with salt-and-pepper hair. His deep facial lines

were evidence of a hard life. His hard appearance was very contrary to his pristine forest green sheriff's uniform. He cleared his throat to speak, but James cut him off.

"I haven't told her yet." He glowered at the other man.

Nodding abruptly, he turned and exited the room, followed by the three cleaners who left total organization and shine behind them.

"Tell me what?" The panic was making her voice rise.

"Remember I said we had some new developments? I want you to talk to the doctor first, and then we will hash out the rest." Angling towards her, he whispered, "Be back in a flash, kitten."

\* \* \* \*

As James left the room, he could hear the doctor's voice trailing off behind him. "So, Mrs. Decker, you gave us all quite a scare." James couldn't help the smile that crept onto his face.

He heard the door quietly click shut as he peered into five sets of eager eyes.

Wide-eyed, Alton asked, "How's she doing?"

James placed his hand on the back of his head and nodded. "She's awake...alive." He wanted to cry, wanted to run back to her side and hold her. Most of all he wanted to beat and torture the fuck out of Cameron, with a blowtorch and a pair of rusty pliers, for doing this to her. Straightening up, he steeled himself. "She is never to be unsupervised. Two in this hallway at all times. No excuses," he growled. "Do you have the laptop?" he asked, looking at Alton.

"Right here, boss."

James turned to reunite with Rainne. He paused with his hand on the knob, his head hanging low. "Have a talk with that deputy that was here. Keep the sheriff away from her. I don't want them upsetting her. They had their chance to help her and failed."

James jumped back away from the door as it opened and Dr. Johnston stepped out.

“We would like to keep her for observation, but if all looks good, then she can go home tomorrow. She should make a full recovery.” Smiling curtly, he shook James’s hand and headed toward the elevators.

“Thank you,” James called after him as he rushed through the doorway to Rainne’s side.

“Mrs. Decker, huh?” Rainne asked with raised eyebrows.

James chuckled. “Well I had to. As far as the hospital knows, Rainne Decker is staying here, not Rainne Stanton. It will keep your mother and Phillip from finding you.” Tilting his head, James took her mouth in a kiss. Pressing his forehead to hers, he added, “Also, it was the only way I could stay with you, and it’s nice to hear.”

“I love you,” she whispered.

“How are you feeling?” he asked as he rose to straighten her blankets.

“Sore as hell, but good.” She laid her head back on the pillow and slowly inhaled a deep breath. “So what are these new developments?”

James felt the blood drain from his face. He didn’t want to have this conversation, but it had to be done. “What I’m about to tell you isn’t going to be easy for you to hear. It breaks my heart to have to tell you this.”

\* \* \* \*

“James, you’re scaring me.” Her mind was getting away from her. A million different scenarios went racing through her mind. The most dominant was James was leaving. It had all been a lie.

He clasped her hand in his. “I don’t want you to be scared, Rainne. You have round-the-clock security. Nothing is going to happen to you.”

She waited patiently as he spoke, her mind still swimming with possibilities.

“Okay, after we found you in the warehouse, I came here with



you, and the team waited there for Cameron. When he returned, the team apprehended him. He put up a fight and was injured.”

“By who?” She couldn’t hide the smirk on her lips. It made her almost giddy to know he got an ass kicking.

“He tried to tackle Riley and was knocked unconscious. They brought him here. The sheriff’s department placed him under arrest as soon as he came to.”

Rainne could feel her heart pounding in her chest. Her face felt hot, and she couldn’t fight the tears welling up in her eyes. “I understand.” She tried desperately to keep her voice even. “You don’t have to hang out. I’ll see you around.” She averted her eyes. She couldn’t look at him or she would lose the small amount of composure she clung to. She didn’t want him to see her crying like a little girl.

“What are you talking about?” he asked angrily.

“Cameron is in jail. Your job is done, and you have to go,” she stated plainly, still staring at the wall.

His mouth gaped, and his eyes bulged out of his head in surprise. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay?” His voice rose an octave. “Did that blow to the head render you quizzical?” His brow dipped into a frown. He was pissed. “Listen closely, little girl,” he growled. “I’m not going anywhere.” He enunciated every word slowly. “You stopped being a job that night in the living room, Rainne.” Keeping his voice low and calculated, he continued, “I’ve never lied to you. I would never lie to you. I’m so in love with you my body pulses with it. Can’t you understand that?”

Rainne couldn’t halt the tears streaming down her face. “I’m sorry,” she choked. “It’s just hard to believe that you’re really mine.”

“Well, believe it, baby. You couldn’t get rid of me if you tried.”

Rainne wiped her face dry. “Okay, what did you want to tell me?”

“When the team handed Cameron to the sheriff’s department, they came upstairs to your room to inform me. About an hour later, that same deputy, the one that was in here earlier, told us that.” James

paused. "He told us that...Cameron escaped custody."

"What?" Rainne screamed. Her body tightened with panic, it felt like her chest was going to explode.

"The officer that was assigned to his room had left, for god knows what reason, and sometime after he came back, the nurse entered the room only to find Cameron was gone."

"Oh, my God! I think I'm gonna be sick," she interrupted, her hand flat against her chest. Her stomach churned violently.

"Baby, it's going to be okay. I promise we will find him." James took hold of her hand and kissed it gingerly. "I'm gonna need you to tell me everything that happened when you were in Cameron's custody, and then we have some other issues to deal with."

"There's more?" Rainne was dumbfounded. *How much more could there be?* "Holy shit storm, Batman!"

\* \* \* \*

As Rainne relayed all the details of her encounter with Cameron, James was in awe of how intelligent she was. Not many people could keep their cool in a situation like that. It's probably the reason she was talking to him at this moment and not lying in the morgue.

"The next thing we need to discuss is going to be more difficult, but I need your help because I'll be damned if I can figure it out." Placing the laptop on the bed and turning it on, he told her, "I need you to watch this. It's the video from your warehouse. It was taken after we discovered you were gone." James played the video and sat down in the chair.

## Chapter 15

As Rainne watched the video, she was confused, but when the final scene played out with Phillip planting a kiss on her mother, it all became crystal clear. “The company...Phillip. How could I have been so stupid? Why would she do this?” Rainne wasn’t sure if she had thought the words or said them aloud. One look into James’s tortured eyes and she knew that he had heard them as well. Her head snapped up. “I need to make a call.” Immediately, a cell phone was placed in her hands, and almost robotically, she dialed a number she couldn’t believe she even remembered.

After a short pause, she spoke. “Mimi Braun, please.” Rainne patiently listened to the “snoozak” that played while on hold. *Who hates the human race enough to invent this shit?*

“This is Mimi Braun. How can I help you?”

“Hi, Mimi. It’s Rainne.”

“Hey, stranger. How have you been, Rainne? I’ve missed you.”

“Mimi, I need your help. I can’t talk about it on the phone. Can you meet me at Health Park Hospital, room 1857?”

“Well, sure, sweetie, anything you need. It will take me a few hours to get there.”

“Please hurry, and don’t tell anyone where you are going. See you soon.” Flipping the phone closed, she handed it back to James, who placed it safely back in its holder. He locked eyes with Rainne, waiting for an explanation.

Averting her eyes, she spoke softly. “Mimi was my father’s lawyer. She still works for the law firm that handles all the company’s legal issues.” Her eyes obverted downward to play absently with the

corner of the sheet. “She is the last person from my father’s world that I trust.” She snapped her eyes up to look at him.

“Why is that?”

“Mimi stepped aside as head attorney after Daddy died. She couldn’t in good faith stand by and watch as Carol turned the company into something he would have hated. She works out of the Tampa branch now.”

“What do you mean? Isn’t it the same company?”

“No.” She laughed a humorless chuckle. “The original company had the same name, but it was the opposite of its present objective. The original was dedicated to helping people and communities that could not help themselves. They helped fund charitable causes, intercity programs, and schools.”

“That doesn’t seem like something you would get rich doing. Where did your father’s wealth come from?”

“Daddy was from old money. His family has been rich for generations. I’m not quite sure of the how or the why. It depends on who you ask.”

“It sounds like he was a good man. Is that why you do what you do?”

She nodded her head slightly in acknowledgement, “He always taught me that money is only worth what you do with it. After his death,” she continued, “Carol wasted no time dismantling the company and turning it into an investment company.” She sniffed in anger. “Dedicated to making the rich richer.” She shook her head as if she still couldn’t believe it.

“How could that happen? Didn’t your father have a board of trustees to keep that from happening?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “She got the entire company, fifty-one percent of the shares. Carol is ruthless. Her favorite rule is the Golden Rule.”

“She who has the gold makes the rules?” James guessed.

“Exactly. She got rid of everyone who wasn’t on board her

capitalist train and ran the rest of them over with it.”

“So what do you think Mimi can do?”

“She can get me answers. Phillip and Carol were talking about shares and fraud on the tape.” She raised her eyebrows knowingly.

“And?” James prodded. The look on his face told her that he was thoroughly confused now.

“Well, you did my financials before you met me, right?”

James nodded, and his eyes widened in acknowledgement.

“That’s right. I don’t own any shares in that company. They are up to something.”

James eyes narrowed on her. “Are you okay? I mean, I almost had a stroke looking at that video. You seem pretty cool about it.”

“I’m so not cool with that, but sadly enough it doesn’t surprise me, and I’m more concerned with what they are planning rather than the fact that they’re doing each other.” She shivered dramatically. “Bleck! Just the thought turns my stomach, but I’ll deal with that when the time comes. Right now I want answers.”

\* \* \* \*

A couple of hours later, the door to the room swung open, and in walked a well-manicured older woman. Her round eyes sat behind a large pair of circular glasses. She had very kind eyes and short, red curls atop her head. She paused as she placed her briefcase down on a chair and tilted her head to look down at Rainne. “What the hell happened to you, girl?” she asked, pursing her lips.

“Hi, Mimi,” Rainne said, smiling.

Propping her hand on her hip, she said with mock anger, “Where have you been? You been wrapped up in a love knot or what?”

“Shut up,” Rainne said with a blush.

She moved in closer to the bed. “But really, what’s going on? First I hear from the office grapevine that you got into a fight at the shareholders’ banquet, and then I hear that you have a babysitter, and

now this? What's the scoop?" She was obviously concerned.

"Well, first things first." Rainne motioned towards James and said, "This is James Decker. He's my bodyguard...and boyfriend." Rainne could feel the blush climb into her face at the last statement.

Stepping forward to shake James's hand, she spoke. "Well, whatever you need from me is yours, kiddo. You know that. Anything."

"James wired my warehouse and found some interesting video of my mom and Phillip. We need you to look at it and help us figure out what it means."

"Of course I will, but I don't know how I could help you. I've been out of the loop as far as Carol is concerned for years."

James started the video, and Rainne watched as Mimi's face went from confusion to disgust to anger.

"Well, if that don't beat all," she said with a tone of rage lacing her voice. "Those two," she hissed as her hands balled into fists.

"What's going on, Mimi?" Rainne asked as she mentally steeled herself for the worst.

"What kind of paperwork did Carol have you sign after your father died?" Mimi asked as she pulled a chair close to Rainne's bed and leaned in seriously.

Rainne tried to think. "Um, it was stuff that had to do with his estate and my inheritance. Why?"

"What did it say?" Mimi looked angry.

"I didn't get a chance to read it. The lawyers said not to worry and they were in a hurry."

"They wouldn't." Mimi seemed to be shaking, her eyes wide with disbelief. "I have to check some things out. Will you be here tomorrow?"

"The doctor said I should be released in the morning. I'll be at home."

"Okay, I'll meet you at your house tomorrow afternoon. We never had this meeting, and stay away from Carol." She pointed her finger

sternly.

Rainne's brows rose. "Oh, not a problem."

\* \* \* \*

Rainne always loved coming home from the hospital. Not the being sick or the pain, but just the coming home to her quiet apartment and resting. This time was a little different. She had never come home to a house full of nervous men before. She had to admit they were sweet, annoying, but sweet. She hadn't had a moment's peace until James seemed to sense her discomfort and banished them into the living room. Even then it only lasted a minute before the doorbell rang.

"I brought food." Rebecca's bright face rounded the corner "Oh, honey." Her face turned concerned. "Look at what that piece of shit did to my best bitch." She sat on the edge of the bed.

"I'm fine." Rainne tried to flash her most reassuring smile. "I did most of the damage myself trying to run away."

"Mama, I'm so happy you're okay. I was so worried about you when James called and told me you were in the hospital." Rainne could tell she was holding back her tears. "I thought I was gonna lose you." Reaching out, she squeezed Rainne's hand.

"Thank you for the food. Trust me, if it's not gone by now, it will be soon." She chuckled softly. "How's everyone at work?" Rainne never missed work unless she was sick, and she couldn't believe how much she actually missed it.

"Oh, everyone's fine. The dragon lady's been asking about you. More like complaining how lazy you are for not being at work, but I think she really misses you."

"That woman will never admit she loves anything but her dogs." Rainne smiled too wide and cringed at the pain.

"Well, I have to motor. Walter's waiting at the home for me. I'm taking him shopping for a gift for his granddaughter this afternoon."

Leaning in, she gently hugged Rainne and waved as she left the room.

The door hadn't had a chance to close when Mimi burst into the apartment. Rounding the corner into Rainne's bedroom, she looked disheartened. "You won't believe what I discovered." Taking a seat next to the bed, she opened the file box she had been toting. "The papers they had you sign? They weren't for your father's estate. Carol and her lawyers duped you, my love." She gave her a stern look.

"What are you talking about?"

"The papers they had you sign were power of attorney forms. You gave her control of your shares."

"What?" *This is unreal.*

She handed Rainne a stack of legal documents. "Here, see for yourself."

Flipping through them slowly, it occurred to Rainne that she'd never seen more than half of these forms in her life. "Wait, Carol only had me sign about ten papers." She flipped through more quickly. "There must be at least sixty sheets here."

Mimi sighed heavily. "They forged your signature on the rest of them, girly." Looking at her mournfully, she continued. "I also found the original will. Your father left it all to you. He wrote it a week after your eighteenth birthday."

Rainne was thoroughly puzzled now. "Why wouldn't he leave my mom anything?"

"He did. He left her the five million she had agreed to in the prenuptial agreement she signed. Why he married that woman..." Her spoken thought trailed off. "But, at least he listened to me and safeguarded your future." Rolling her eyes, she added, "A lot of good it did in the end. That snake." She seethed. "She stole your father's company right out from under you."

Rainne paled. "I can't believe this. And what does Phillip have to do with all this? Why involve him? Why would she mess with me like that?"



“Legally, your spouse would be entitled to your shares. He would no doubt want them in the divorce. He’d have a good case since he’s worked there for years.” Taking off her glasses, she pinched the bridge of her nose. “Why your father married that woman I’ll never know.” Putting her glasses back on roughly, she leaned in closer. “Your mother is rolling in her grave.”

Rainne was stunned, frozen in place. “*Wh-what?*” She stuttered, trying desperately to form thought into words. *Did I hear that right?* Mimi’s face swelled with first recognition and then agony. “Oh, my god, you didn’t know?” Her hand flattened against her chest. “I thought you knew.” She reached out to clasp Rainne’s hand only to have her pull it away.

Rainne’s thoughts escalated in her mind. *Not my mother*, she thought. She shook her head weakly as she processed the new information. “I can’t believe this,” she said in a barely audible tone. Her mind swam with memories and past opinions about her life. She had always wondered why she and Carol never looked alike, why she had never felt a bond with her. She had always felt like an outsider around Carol. As she sifted through her feelings, it became blindingly clear that what she felt was...relief. She was relieved that she hadn’t just been paranoid about not being loved by her. It had killed her that they weren’t close. Now she knew why, and the relief that flowed through her was like someone untying a noose from around her neck.

Mimi stammered, her face horrorstruck. “I’m so sorry, Rainne. I thought you knew. I can’t believe Jason never told you the truth.”

Rainne took a long, steady breath “Carol’s not my mom,” she stated plainly. “Who is, Mimi?”

Mimi cleared her throat. “Your mother’s name was Lucy McConaughy. She and your father met in college. She was sweet and loving, kind, smart, and fun. Oh, she was fun to be around.” She looked at Rainne with longing in her eyes. “You remind me so much of her. They were so in love that it makes me grateful I got to witness something so beautiful.” She reached up and stroked her face with the

back of her hand, her expression was thoughtful. “You look so much like her it makes me miss her when I see you.”

Rainne tried in vain to blink back the tears welling up in her eyes. “What happened to her?”

The sadness returned to her eyes. “She died giving birth to you. Your father was inconsolable. He never spoke of her. On the few occasions she came up in conversation, the look in his eyes was heartbreaking.” Her face turned irate. “I’m sure Carol played on that.” Mimi pulled a tissue out of her suit pocket and wiped her tears away. “Well, I do have some good news.” Looking up at Rainne, she smiled through the sadness on her face. “I and a few colleagues sorted through the papers last night, and we found a loophole.” Her smile turned mischievous, and Rainne couldn’t help but feel a little better. “The documents clearly state that you can end the agreement at any time you wish.”

“Why would they do that? It seems too easy.”

“Well, they have to do that by law. I don’t believe they ever expected you to find out, and for almost ten years you didn’t. The papers state that you weren’t capable of running the company. If you ever found out, they could tell a judge that you aren’t qualified to. Since you’ve never worked there and it’s an investment company, they could very well win.”

Rainne’s heart sank at the thought of her father’s life’s work being destroyed by Carol and her minions. It sickened her to the core of her being. “So there’s nothing we can do?”

Mimi’s face perked up. “I did say I had good news.” She wagged her eyebrows. “We have more than enough proof of what Carol and her lawyers did. We have several witnesses to back up what Phillip did, and we have the tape from the warehouse. All that’s left to do is for you to go to work.” The smile she brandished filled her whole face.

“Go to work?” Rainne’s mind moved slowly. Almost as if she heard a click in her brain, it all became evident. “Go to work.” She said smoothly. “Is tomorrow too early?” she asked almost innocently.

After a few hours of planning, Mimi looked at her watch. “Goodness, is that the time? I have some more preparations to tend to. I’ll pick you up at 9:00 am tomorrow morning.” Mimi rose from her seat and headed toward the door, and James followed her.

Rounding the corner, away from Rainne’s earshot, James turned to her and asked, “Is this really going to work? I don’t want her to get hurt.”

Mimi smiled sweetly and patted his chest. “That’s why you and your boys are tagging along.” She could see the concern in his features. “You take care of that one.” She pointed her finger in the direction of the bedroom. “She’s special.”

“I’ll guard her with my life, Mimi.” James softly closed the door behind her. He paused thoughtfully. His heart was full of hope and worry that tomorrow everything went as planned, before returning to Rainne.

## Chapter 16

“Hey, you’re supposed to be in bed taking it easy.” James rushed to help Rainne with the shirt she was fighting with. It was threatening to topple her over.

She stilled with her arm in the air and her hair sticking out from the neckline of the T-shirt she had been trying to remove. “I’ve almost got it. I’m not helpless, ya know,” she said in a muffled tone.

James’s lips thinned trying to hide his smile. “I know you’re not helpless.” Clasp her elbow, he lifted the shirt from her head and slid it down her left arm. As the shirt hit the floor, he appraised her. She stood naked but a pair of black, boy-cut panties on. She was the epitome of sexy, even with the bruises and swollen shoulder. Her face was flushed and pink. She had the most innocent eyes he had ever gazed into.

“What?” she asked in a small voice, embarrassed by her exposure.

“I’m just looking at you.” His hand reached up and stroked her right temple with the back of his hand. “You are so beautiful.”

She dropped her eyes to the floor as James watched the flush overtake her features. “Stop,” she whined. *I love it when she gets all shy. It’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen.*

James lifted her chin to see her face. “I won’t stop,” he said softly. “I won’t ever stop, stop loving you, needing you. It will never stop.” He then realized how wet his palms were. *I’ve been through war. I’ve seen atrocities that would make most men crumble, and I wasn’t half this nervous.* This woman did things to him, all of him, he’d never dreamed possible. “Sit. I need to tell you something.” He gingerly lowered her to the mattress.

\* \* \* \*

She reached up with her good arm and cupped his face. “What is it, baby? You can tell me anything. Why the look?” *He looks like he’s gonna faint*, she thought to herself.

James crouched down on the floor and gazed up into Rainne’s eyes. “From the second I met you, you have invaded every aspect of my soul. I don’t *want* to imagine my existence without you. I’m so in love with you. You are the most amazing woman I’ve ever met.” James slowly reached into his pocket and pulled out a black velvet box. Opening it, he held it up to show Rainne. “Will you make my life complete and be my wife?”

Rainne was stunned. She couldn’t think straight. Her mouth fell agape. “I...Wh...How?” she stuttered incoherently. She mentally tried to figure out if she was asleep and just dreaming all this. *This can’t be a dream. I’m in pain*, instantly felt stupid for the thought.

James’s face was frozen, licking his lips quickly. “I know what you’re thinking. I know it’s crazy that we haven’t known each other very long, and I understand.” The words had come out so fast and jumbled that Rainne had to strain to collect them all. He paused and placed the box on the bed beside her. Taking her hands in his, he spoke slower as he stared into her face. “I love you. We don’t have to get married now. We can wait, but I will marry you. You are the one I’m supposed to be with. I feel it right here.” His face was earnest as he placed Rainne’s hand over his heart.

Rainne was so taken aback with his declaration, she couldn’t speak, couldn’t think. Sneaking a glance down, her eyes found the ring. It was brilliant. White gold setting with dark, almost black sapphires with marquise cut diamond accents in between the stones. It took her breath away. She had always envisioned her wedding ring, and it was like he pulled the ring from her head. Without another thought, she pressed her lips to his hungrily.

James wrapped one arm around her waist and crushed her to his body, sliding her to the edge of the bed. He adhered himself to her, pressing every inch of his body to hers as he returned her kiss. Panting feverishly, he leaned his head back. "Was that a yes?" he asked with one eyebrow cocked.

"Yes," her small voice whispered. She took a deep breath. "I don't *care* if we are crazy. I just want to be with you no matter what, always with you." Her fingers gently touched his face.

"Always." His voice was rough. He leaned down and took her earlobe with his lips for a brief moment. "I'm going to love you forever," he whispered passionately.

"Just until the mountains crumble and the trees burn," she replied softly.

"Until the mountains crumble and the trees burn." With that sentiment he placed one broad hand on her right shoulder and gently reclined her back onto the bed. Reaching down, he hooked his finger into the pad of her underwear, and with a small tug the material ripped apart for him. "You are soaking wet, kitten." He moaned.

Rainne's hand trembled flat against her stomach. "It's just for you, baby," she whispered.

James leaned down, spreading her thighs, and slowly licked the cream from her pussy. Spearing his tongue into her core, he drew more wetness out of her. Fucking her slowly, methodically.

She whimpered, unable to do much more than attempt to squirm closer to his invading appendage.

He reached up with one hand to roll her nipple between his fingers. The other hand delved lower to finger her ass.

Rainne tensed as she felt James's thick finger circle around her anus. Slowly, she relaxed as a warm heat slowly waved over her body. Her thighs fell open, and her pussy slowly relaxed as he stretched her ass with his thumb. Unconsciously, her hips rocked back and forth as she fucked him back. She could feel her juices drip down to where he penetrated her nether hole as his tongue pushed her

higher.

“Good girl,” he crooned against her clit. Locking his lips around her swollen clit, James suckled feverishly as he plunged his finger into Rainne’s ass.

A cry broke from her throat as she gripped his hair. Panting helplessly, she was thrown over the edge between pleasure and pain into a spin of never-ending orgasms. She couldn’t stop. She couldn’t move.

\* \* \* \*

James felt her body convulse as her sweetness dripped from her. Stopping the torture on her button, he lapped at her, trying to catch every last drop of her juice. He was addicted to her taste, sweeter than any drug to a junkie. He couldn’t get enough.

Rainne’s tremors slowed as the sweet wave of afterglow hit her. She breathed in slow and deep, waiting for his next move.

James towered over her, lifting her thighs. Releasing his cock from the prison of his pants, he gently nudged the moist cavern. Slowly, ever so slowly, he entered her. He needed to be gentle. He didn’t want to injure her further by taking her hard.

Rainne’s whimpers increased. “James, that feels so good,” she moaned. Her hand gripped the side of the bed as she tried to sit up and get some leverage.

“Baby,” James said softly. His hand moved to her belly and flattened against it. “Slow and deep.” He pressed deeper inside her grotto and tenderly rolled his hips, rubbing her G-spot with the head of his member. A male groan escaped his chest. He could feel her getting wetter. He anticipated the waves of pleasure that would soak his balls when he finally let her explode.

“God, baby, it’s so deep.” She panted. “I’m going to come,” she whimpered in a little voice.

“Not yet, kitten, not yet.” He pulled back leisurely and bit by bit entered her again, rocking against her shortly just to repeat the action.

“James, I can’t stand it. Please,” she cried.

He watched as she begged and writhed beneath him, soaking him with her sweetness. The exquisite flush of her lust-filled body and her pink pussy constricting his cock was the most amazing feeling he had ever experienced. James was in heaven. “You ready, kitten? I’m gonna fill you up, baby.” He couldn’t help it, he was so hot for her.

“Yes! Yes, baby, please!” she begged desperately.

James leaned forward, covering Rainne with his body. Bracing his weight on his elbow, he rocked ever so slowly deep inside her.

“James!” Rainne whimpered, helpless underneath him.

A smile tipped his lips as he leaned to her ear. “That’s a good kitten. Come for Daddy. Soak that big cock.”

\* \* \* \*

The sound of his voice was all she needed to be thrown over the edge into ecstasy. She wrapped her good arm around his neck and held on for dear life as her soul exploded.

James buried his steel rod into her depths, pressing hard into her, and filled her to overflowing with not only his cock but the seed that spilled from it.

She couldn’t stop. The pleasure lapped over her in a never-ending cycle. “James!” she cried. “Don’t move!” She clung to him in desperation to catch her breath. Slowly, her tremors subsided and she nuzzled his neck.

“I love you, Rainne,” he whispered.

Rainne turned her head to look into his eyes. “I’m so in love with you.” And took his lips with her own.

\* \* \* \*



“Can you help me with this please?” Rainne asked, her voice laced with aggravation.

James pinned the stray hair into place for her and turned her in his arms to face her. “Why are you so nervous?”

“I just can’t believe I’m about to go through with this.” She breathed out exasperatedly. “How do I look?” She smoothed her hand down the front of her black business suit and pulled at the sling that cradled her arm.

James smiled. “You look like you’re about to tackle the corporate world.” He gently kissed her forehead. “Mimi’s waiting in the living room.” Taking her hand, he led her into the living room where the team was suiting up to leave. “Don’t worry about a thing. Mimi has all the legal paperwork.” He motioned towards the woman who held up a stack of documents and smiled confidently. “The arrest warrants have all been issued, and the press has been called. The sheriff is meeting us there, and so are the lawyers.” He looked around to his team. “Are we a go?”

A round of “yeahs” filled the room.

“Why are they strapping on firearms like they’re going to war?” Rainne asked, her brow dipping in confusion. She didn’t like the looks of this, and if gunfire were to break out, she wanted a bulletproof vest, too.

James rubbed her back soothingly. “It’s just a precaution in case someone gets stupid.”

\* \* \* \*

Pulling up to the offices of Stanton Industries was surreal. Rainne got out of the car and followed Mimi up to a group of people dressed in business suits. She let them speak amongst themselves as she looked around her. About halfway down the block were James and the security team talking to a group of deputies, and in the other direction, news vans were parking and preparing to get the best shot

of the shit storm Rainne was about to unleash. She was trying desperately to still the tremors trailing through her body. She felt sick to her stomach, and her mind was a total blank. Interrupting her self-doubt was Mimi's determined voice.

"You ready, girly?"

Rainne swallowed audibly. "Yeah."

"Now don't be nervous. Everything has been taken care of," she informed her as she led her into the building. "Just let the sheriff go first."

As Rainne was led into the building, she racked her brain for something to say to Carol and Phillip when they all came face to face. Nothing came to mind. They swept through the lobby, and the sheriff's men fanned out, making sure no one alerted the CEOs upstairs of their arrival. They spread out and entered all the elevators at once, carrying the whole swarm to the top floor.

Exiting the elevators, Rainne could see that the company's employees were confused, frightened even. Mimi motioned her to the large double doors in the back of the space that was the conference room. Pausing outside the door, Mimi turned to Rainne and spoke.

"Your parents would be so proud." She gave her a gentle hug and stepped back. "Open 'em up, boys."

Two sheriff's deputies stepped up and opened the doors for them. The tremors instantly stopped, and the nausea quickly retreated. In her heart and mind she knew exactly what she was going to say, and she could feel a sense of peace wash over her. Rainne's heart stopped for the slightest second before she advanced to claim what was rightfully hers.

## Chapter 17

Entering the boardroom, the sound of a pin dropping would have been earsplitting. The meeting had abruptly halted with the opening of the doors, and now Rainne's group stood just inside the room as fourteen pairs of curious eyes stared on in wonder.

Standing from her seat, at the head of the expansive mahogany table, Carol's eyebrows dipped in anger. "What's this all about?"

Rainne stepped forward, only vaguely aware of Mimi and James closely flanking her, and spoke in a pleasant but authoritative tone. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen." She shifted her gaze to Phillip and Carol. "Phillip. Carol." She sneered. "I have a court order for Stanton Industries to cease all business." She glared at Carol, unable to fight the grin that came to her face. "Immediately."

Carol and Phillip looked cocky as they walked toward her.

"You can't just walk in here..." she said, her voice rising in anger.

Rainne cut her off, fighting to keep her tone cool and collected as she spoke directly to her. "Oh, yes I can. I can, and I am. As of this second, Stanton Industries is reverting back to its original objective." Stepping up to them, her gaze fixed on Carol's. "The way my father had always intended it to be." She tilted her head to address the rest of the group. "The rest of you do have a choice in this matter," she proclaimed, motioning in Mimi's direction. "Mimi Braun has your severance packages, and you will be rewarded handsomely should you choose to walk away."

"You have no authority over this company or the business of this board," Phillip said almost joyously. He seemed to be enjoying all this a little too much for Rainne's taste. "Now, Rainne," he crooned,

stepping towards her with his eyes smoldering. "Be reasonable. You can't run a corporation, especially one this size." He reached his hand up as if to stroke her cheek and was abruptly halted by James's .357 in his face.

"I believe I warned you about putting your hands on her," James growled.

"All this isn't necessary," he stammered as he nervously backed away. "Once we're married, all this will be ours. We can run it together, baby. However you want."

Rainne held Phillip's gaze as she raised her hand and lowered James's firearm. "Oh, Phillip," she sighed happily. "I told you before that I wouldn't marry you, besides," She smiled at him sweetly. "I'm already engaged." She held her left hand up to flash them both the ring.

The two of them paled instantly. Phillip recovered first. "Do you really think I would let you marry someone else?" he hissed. "You belong to me!" he snarled.

Carol interjected. "Phillip's right. I would never allow it. You cannot marry outside the agreement and shame your father's good name and reputation."

Rainne lost the calm she so desperately was grasping. "Shame this family?" she yelled. "The two of you have done that without any help from me. I refuse to marry *your boyfriend*." Her tone rose sharply on the last words.

Carol's eyes widened in shock, her mouth agape, but no words spilled out.

"And furthermore," Rainne continued, her voice still angry, "why you give a damn about this family is beyond me, considering the fact that you're not even my real mother." She watched her expression change from shock to alarm with smug satisfaction.

Stepping forward, Phillip smiled confidently. "None of this answers the million-dollar question. Who is he?" He was using that cool, sarcastic tone he had used to talk down to her so many times.

She hated that tone and knew he was thinking about doing something horrible to the man who dared steal his meal ticket. A small smile graced her lips at the thought of him going toe to toe with James. The expression “two hits” James hitting Phillip and Phillip hitting the floor, took on a whole new meaning for her.

James moved, shielding Rainne with his large body, blocking Phillip’s path to her. “It’s me,” he proclaimed.

His smile faded immediately, and he started to tremble. Phillip lunged at James, fists out. He was screaming rage-filled incoherencies.

James ducked as his fist sailed by his head. His hand speared out and grabbed Phillip’s wrist. Twisting him around, he pinned his arm to his back and with a loud thud slammed his head into the table. A large deputy stepped in and slapped a pair of handcuffs onto Phillip’s wrist and announced. “Phillip McCray, you are under arrest for fraud, larceny, and just plain being an asshole.”

He was jerked upright from the table, and Rainne hoped that the red mark that marred his face would turn into a nasty bruise.

Phillip started screaming threats at her as the officer pushed him past her. “I’ll be out in an hour! You’re mine! I’ll kill you! You fucking cunt!” His rant trailed off into the distance as he was hauled out the door.

Rainne turned her attention back to Carol. *One down, one to go*, she thought.

She stared back at Rainne with tears in her eyes. “I’m so sorry, baby. I always thought of you as my own. I only wanted to do what I thought was right for you.” Her hands were held out, palms forward, as she looked around at the whole group frantically.

Rainne could tell she was clamoring for just the right words to save her own ass. She wasn’t buying it for a second. She lost all control and started yelling at her. “You have destroyed this company and my father...”

She was cut off as she started screaming back at her. “Your father was an easily led automaton, a fool, useless!” she sneered.

Rainne quickly stamped down the urge to knock her to the floor and kick her to death. She knew in her head that Carol’s opinions didn’t matter. She was headed for jail, her worst nightmare. She wouldn’t fall for her baiting tactics. As she turned to motion for the sheriff to move in and arrest her, Carol spoke.

“That’s right! Get out!” she ordered. “You’re an empty-headed little bitch,” she bit out. “Just like your mother was.”

Mimi locked eyes with Rainne as Mimi’s hand came to her shoulder. “It’s okay, kiddo. Allow me,” she said in a pleasant voice. Mimi then turned abruptly and punched Carol dead in the face, laying her out on the floor. Stepping back and shaking the sting out of her hand, she ordered, “Get this trash out of here.”

As the sheriff escorted Carol out of the boardroom, Rainne was only barely aware of the idle threats she was screaming. “I want her arrested for assault! You can’t do this to me! Get your hands off me!” She struggled uselessly against the officer handcuffing her. “Do you know who I am? I’ll have all of you fired!”

Rainne stood stock-still, frozen in astonishment. Blinking a few times, she looked at Mimi. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“She’s had that coming for a long time.”

“Thank you, Mimi, for everything. I owe you so much I can’t begin to pay you back for it all.”

“Well, you can start by getting me some ice,” she said with mock anger. “Then you can get to work turning this company around.”

They both laughed in unison.

“Where do we start?” Rainne asked, more eager than ever before to take the reins.

The next several days were the craziest of Rainne’s life. She started by going to each department personally and explaining the situation. She was amazed at how many people welcomed the change

to the business and were excited about Rainne taking the helm. It gave her a much-needed boost of confidence.

After everyone had been made aware of the new changes, Mimi and the legal team set out to document all of the company's fiscal issues. Carol had been good at her job, and the business was swimming in money. The shareholders weren't too happy with the changes made, but they were amply compensated, and a good majority even stayed on as benefactors for the first of many charitable projects Rainne had in mind.

Everything was going like clockwork. The legal system seemed content with making an example of Phillip and Carol. She could live with that. Mimi had helped her go through the personal finances, separate them, and revert everything back to her. Now all that needed to be done was sell off the real estate.

"Are you busy?" James poked his head into the office one morning.

Rainne's head snapped up. "I'm never too busy for you, baby." She smiled at him, feeling her face heat with the memories of last night's lovemaking session.

"I was just wondering if I could take my girl to lunch. I missed you this morning. When I woke up, you were already gone."

She bit her lip. "Lunch is going to be impossible today, Sweetie." She put down the box she'd been sifting through. "I have a few meetings this afternoon, and I'm finally getting this office together. The movers are on the way to bring me some new furniture." She wrinkled her nose. "Carol had awful taste in office furniture. This weekend the entire building will be getting a makeover."

\* \* \* \*

She looked frazzled. James racked his brain for a way to help take some stress off her. Taking her hand, he led her around the desk and leaned her against it. "Are you okay? I worry about you doing too

much, getting worn out. You don't have to be superwoman, ya know?" He gently kissed the ring he had placed on her finger days ago.

She sighed. "I know. I'm just excited. I wanted to clean out this office today before the meetings and get the last remnants of Carol out of this building. The meetings this afternoon will determine the new board and CEO. I don't want to run this place, just oversee it." She smiled as if she was remembering a private joke. "I'm not built for the corporate world."

"Are we still on for tonight?" James knew tonight's events had been something Rainne had been dreading.

"Yeah, everything's set." She sighed. "The band and the movers will meet us there at seven o'clock sharp." She tried to keep her tone light, but James heard right through that little charade.

James wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "It's going to be fine. I promise." He kissed her forehead. "I have a few things I need to do. I'll meet you there." He left the office with a small click of the door.



## Chapter 18

Rainne stood outside the large oak door of her father's house, unable to put the key in the lock and enter. *Why? You've been here a thousand times.* Steeling herself with a deep breath, she unlocked the door and took a few steps inside.

The house seemed different somehow. Over the years, she had had mixed feelings about the mansion. Sometimes it felt homey and comforting, while other times it had felt like a jail cell. Now, looking around, it made her feel sad, almost mournful.

As she slowly strolled through, she had brief flashbacks of memories, good and bad. She frowned to herself at the mess made by the federal agents who had gathered evidence for the case against Carol and Phillip.

"Are you ready for this?"

The low voice had her spinning in place. She jumped as she saw James in the doorway. "Oh, you scared me," she said with a shaky, humorless chuckle. "I guess I have to be, don't I?"

James quickly breached the distance between them and wrapped his arms around her protectively. "It doesn't have to be done tonight," he whispered tenderly in her ear. "We can wait."

Rainne shook her head in his chest. "No, I want to get this done and over with. It feels like an anvil hanging over my head. I just want to sell it and move on."

"Are you sure you want to sell it? I thought with it being your father's you might want to live here."

She looked up into his eyes. "This place is way too big for just us. I often wondered why my father bought such a grandiose piece of

property. Mimi had told me that it's been in the family for generations, and my parents had intended to fill it full of children. That was until..." She trailed off, not able to finish the thought.

He tightened his arms around her. "We could fill it," he said.

She heard the smile in his voice. She couldn't help but smile, too. "I bet we could." She kissed his chest, biting him softly. "I didn't know you wanted children."

He stepped back to look at her. "I didn't until I found you. I think about you pregnant and glowing. Teaching our sons how to hunt and fish. Scaring the shit out of any boy who dared think he was good enough for one of our beautiful daughters." They laughed in unison. "Growing old surrounded by our children and grandchildren." He paused thoughtfully. "I want all of that with you. I want our children to have your beautiful ringlet curls and big brown eyes. I want them to have my height and that's all, just my height." His smile was brighter than the sun.

The moment was cut off when someone behind them cleared his throat. Glancing around James, Rainne saw that the band had arrived and so had the movers.

"Are we ready to get to work?" Annie asked cheerfully.

"Yup, yup, let's do this," she retorted.

The evening progressed quickly. The movers were efficient. All too soon they had the entire downstairs emptied out. Rainne's main job was remembering what pieces went to her apartment and what was being delivered to the company to be auctioned off for charity. The rest would be delivered to Goodwill.

The entourage moved upstairs and quickly got to work moving everything downstairs. Rainne walked down the expansive hallway and paused at the farthest door on the left. She entered the room and stopped dead in her tracks. "Oh, my god," she whispered almost silently to herself.

"Everything okay?" James asked, coming up behind her.

Rainne's heart was breaking. "This was my room. My father made it a point to always keep it clean so if I ever wanted to come home, I'd always have a place of my own." She examined the room, trying to stamp down her anger at Carol. The room obviously hadn't been touched in nearly a decade, and a thick layer of dust covered everything like a second skin. This was her proof that she meant no more to Carol than the gum stuck to the bottom of her high-heeled shoe. Rainne finally broke and collapsed into James's arms, sobbing.

"Sshh," he crooned. "It's okay, baby." He smoothed his hands over her hair. "Let's go through the rest of the upstairs. We can deal with this later." He led her out into the hallway and closed the door behind him. "Are you all right, baby?" he asked worriedly.

Rainne wiped her face with the back of her hand. "I'll be fine. I'm just overwhelmed I think."

"Pizza's here!" someone called from downstairs.

James took her hand and led her to the staircase. "I think it's a good idea if you eat something."

"Yeah, I think you're right." She tried to smile.

James paid for the pizzas, and Rainne had to smile when she realized he had had the man stop and get a few cases of beer on his way.

"You seem to have thought of everything," she said, trying to pull herself out of her funky mood.

"I just want you to relax. I hate you being so stressed out and sad," he said as he pulled her to the floor in front of the fireplace.

She smiled shyly. It was so hard for her to get used to how he cared for her even with the little things. She felt like a princess with him and didn't think she'd ever get used to it.

As Rainne sat on the floor surrounded by her bandmates, James's security team, the movers, and the housekeeping staff, she felt better. She realized that it wasn't just the food and beers making her relax, but the company. She could see how much her friends really were her family and how much they loved her. Seeing firsthand how James

interacted with his friends was hilarious. Even the housekeeping staff seemed happy to see her. She remembered most of them from her childhood. They had been loyal to her father even after his death, staying on to care for the house he loved so much. She could almost feel her heart warming in her chest. This was her family, and for the first time in a very long time, she felt like she was home.

\* \* \* \*

A few hours later, Rainne closed the door for the last time. They had cleared out the bulk of the furniture, and the moving crew would be back in a few days to finish up. She turned to James. “Well, that’s the last of them,” she said with a smile.

“Thank God,” James exclaimed as he pressed her back up against the door, knotting his fingers in her hair. “I didn’t think I’d last another minute not being able to touch you.” He captured her mouth in a kiss and pressed his full body against hers.

Breaking away, breathless, she asked, “Where is everyone else?”

“The team is doing sweeps outside, and the housekeeping staff has turned in for the night.” He gazed into her eyes and pursed his lips. “It looks like we’re all alone.” He smiled wickedly.

Rainne felt her stomach do flips and wondered if this feeling, these first love flutters, would ever go away. She hoped like hell that the answer was no. “I’m so in love with you,” she whispered.

“And I you,” he whispered. Taking her hand, he led her to the dining room.

She was stunned. “When did you do this?” She looked around the room in wonder. The room was lined with what seemed to be dozens of candles, and a fire was roaring in the fireplace. In front of the fire was a giant bearskin rug that had once adorned the floor in the study. The light from the candles was soft and romantic. It made her feel instantly at ease.

James chuckled softly as he laid her down on the rug. He cupped the back of her head with his hand while balancing his weight on his elbow. Slowly, he moved his hand down her chest, unfastening buttons as he went. "I had the housekeeper help me while you were upstairs supervising the movers." He came down on her lips and kissed her deeply.

She opened to him, letting his tongue invade her. Tangling her hand in his hair, she cuddled closer.

Breaking the kiss, he looked down at her. "We never finished our conversation before," he said roughly, trying to catch his breath.

Her brow furrowed into a puzzled expression. "What conversation?"

"I never asked you if you wanted children," he said softly.

Rainne thought she heard hopefulness in his voice, maybe a little uncertainty. "I had never thought about having kids. It always seemed like something I wanted, but never actually planned on getting. Ya know?" She cupped the side of his face with her hand. "That was until you asked me to marry you."

He leaned to her, kissing her neck and down her chest, stripping her of her clothes as he went. "How many were you thinking?"

She defiantly heard the smile in his voice. "Well," she sighed breathlessly. It was hard to think when he was touching her like that. "This house has ten bedrooms." She trailed off, waiting for the bait to set in.

\* \* \* \*

James paused. *Ten bedrooms.* Sitting up, he pulled Rainne so she straddled his lap. "You mean it, baby?" He smiled. "Are you sure?"

As the red flooded her features his cock got exceedingly harder. "Well, this house was my father's and he had intended to fill it with the pitter-patter of little feet. So yeah, let's do it. Let's fill it."

James wrapped his big arms around her waist and hugged her to his body. “Oh, baby.” He didn’t think he would be able to contain his happiness. “Let’s start now.” He laughed.

“Definitely.” She laughed as she crushed her lips to his.

## **Chapter 19**

Rainne awoke slowly, entangled in James's arms, warm and content not to move from this bliss. "Mmm." She sighed.

"Good morning," he said softly into her hair.

"How'd you sleep?" she asked, cuddling into his chest. She had no idea of what time it was nor did she care. She had all intentions of staying just as she was for as long as possible.

"Good. We need to get more of these rugs." He laughed. "Riley hunts bears. Maybe he could get us one."

"Riley hunts bears?" she asked, a bit shocked, not knowing people could or would hunt bears.

"Yeah, and anything else worth eating." He rolled her onto her back, and his gaze drifted down her body. "Speaking of eating..." He smiled seductively.

"You hungry, baby?" she cooed.

"I love you in the morning all wet and sleepy, warm and soft." He moved slowly down her body and parted her thighs. His gaze drifted down to her pink lips. They were soaking wet with her lust for him. He speared his tongue out and slowly took one long lick.

Rainne trembled. She could feel her orgasm building in her core, ready to erupt. Her soft whimpers danced through the air around them.

James's head shot up when the sound of commotion was heard in the foyer.

The distant voices were sharp and rushed. "Where did this come from?" someone was demanding.

They rushed to get decent and flew out of the room.

“What’s going on?” James asked anxiously.

Rainne raced up onto the scene, behind James, to see the housekeeper cowering as Ash towered over her. She glanced around the room and found the source of all the commotion. Inside, her brain screeched to a halt, and recognition flooded her senses. She knew the answer to both James’s and Ash’s questions.

On the foyer table was a beautifully wrapped gift exactly like the one that had been delivered to her apartment.

Distantly, she heard James and Ash converse about the package, not quite comprehending the actual words. She was so fixated on the package that simple things like blinking and breathing seemed like impossible feats.

James approached the package and read the card.

*We could have made beautiful music together, my little freak, but instead? You’re next!*

Ash ripped the top off, and James gasped as he saw what it contained.

Rainne had to know. She willed her legs forward and peered into the box. Seeing the severed head of her beloved Merlyn proved too much for her brain, and the room started to tilt and become fuzzy around the edges. Blackness overcame her.

\* \* \* \*

James saw her sway, and quickly, he reached out and caught her before she hit the floor. “Holy shit!” he exclaimed. Laying her down gently, he looked up at Ash. “What are we going to do? We can’t possibly keep her safe tonight at the show.” James was tortured by his failure to save her from Cameron. He feared losing the most important thing in his world.



At that moment the rest of the security team walked through the door, followed by Rainne's friends. "Rainne!" Rebecca yelled. "Is she all right?" She stooped down next to her. "What happened?" she demanded angrily.

Ash picked up the box and dropped it on the floor next to her. "This happened." His voice was dark, edgy.

James looked at him, eyes wide with disbelief. "What the fuck, man!"

He met James's look and said, "Dude, I don't know what all the fuss is over. It's just a cat."

Rebecca leaned over the box to examine it and gasped. "Oh, no!" she exclaimed. She started rubbing Rainne's arm and patting her face, trying to bring her around. "Rainne, wake up, mama. It's gonna be okay!"

Ash watched, perplexed, and then turned to James and rolled his eyes. "Women." He scoffed.

Rebecca's face twisted in anger. She jumped to her feet and attempted to shove Ash. "You asshole!" she screamed. "Her father gave her that cat!" She backed up, panting. "Two days before he died in the accident. He gave Rainne that cat for her birthday." She shot him another angry scowl and returned to awaken her friend.

The realization of why that cat was so important flooded James's mind. He knew how much that animal meant to her and honestly thought it was a little extreme. He had chalked it up to her just being an impassioned individual. Knowing the origin of the cat made all the difference. It had been the last link to her beloved father.

James bent down beside Rainne and gently petted her head. "Come on, baby. Wake up." He sighed a breath of relief when he saw her lids flutter slightly.

"I've got her," Rebecca said tightly. "Could you get him out of my sight before I snap and stuff his head into a pretty box?" she asked sarcastically as she shot daggers in Ash's direction.

James rose from the floor, taking the box with him, and stormed past Ash, motioning him to follow. The rest of the team trailed as he stomped down the front steps, taking two at a time. When he hit the driveway, he turned. The look of murder on his face froze his team in place. “What the fuck happened?” he bellowed, unable to contain the rage. He held the box out for them to see.

All but Ash looked on in different shades of disbelief, sickness, and disgust.

The small group slowly shifted their gazes to James with regret in their eyes.

Alton stepped forward. “James, I don’t know what to say.”

James rubbed his hands roughly over his face and through his hair. “Check the cameras and sensors and call the local sheriff. We’ll need backup for tonight.” With that barking order, James stormed back into the house to check on Rainne. “And get that fucking box out of here! She doesn’t need to see it again!” he snarled over his shoulder.

James searched the downstairs for Rainne and her friends, who were not where he had left them. Approaching the kitchen door, he heard voices and paused to eavesdrop on the conversation.

Rainne’s soft, broken sobs could be heard drifting through the door.

“Honey, it’s going to be okay.”

“I’m so sorry, sweets.”

“Here, this will make you feel better.” The sound of silverware could be heard being shuffled.

“Oh, nice! Your stepmom had good taste in beer.”

“Put that back!” someone chided.

Rainne sniffled. “No, give me one.”

A moment of silence filled the air. “I can’t believe that psycho killed Mer-me,” Rainne said sadly. “He’s pissed because I got away when he kidnapped me, but to kill Merlyn? How fucked in the head

do you have to be?" She breathed out heavily. "Hand me a fork, would ya?"

James slid slowly into the kitchen to see the scene he had been listening to. Rainne and her friends were all crowded around the large kitchen island. They all had a fork in one hand and a bottle of expensive German beer in the other. They talked and laughed a little, drinking beer and sharing a large gourmet cheesecake.

James slipped back out of the kitchen. Knowing her friends were taking care of her made him feel a little better. Now if he could just catch that sick bastard, he and Rainne could get on with their lives together.

\* \* \* \*

"Yes, I understand the cost is astronomical." James was steadily losing his patience with the local sheriff. "Well, as I said before, we will be covering the cost. Just send Ms. Stanton and myself the bill." After a few moments, James hung the phone up and sat in the tall-backed leather office chair. He looked at his team and sighed. "It's all in place."

"How are Rainne and the rest of them dealing with the news?" Riley asked with a smirk.

The team and the band had all been at odds at the news that the security at the concert would be heavy. They had not been pleased. They were worried it would scare fans off.

"They understand. They're just not happy with it, but they will survive." James stood and strolled towards the door. "You guys get going to the arena and get set up. Alton and I and the deputies will escort them to the show."

Emptying the room, the group split up. Alton went for the back door to make sure the police escort was ready and thoroughly briefed on the situation. The rest of the group went to the front door and off to the arena. James went upstairs to let the band and Rainne know they

had to finish up because ready or not, they were leaving in fifteen minutes.

James entered Rainne's bedroom to see the band members in different degrees of readiness. Markus was fully dressed, sitting on her bed Indian style playing air drums with his sticks and talking about how cool it would be to win the competition. Joel and Annie were in the corner on the floor. Joel was tuning the guitars, and Annie was fixing the buckle on her shoe. Rebecca was at the large vanity mirror applying her makeup. "Hey, guys, we're leaving in fifteen minutes," he announced.

"Yup, yup," Rebecca said absently as she turned around and slung a tube of eyeliner at Joel, who had asked for it. "Rainne!" Rebecca yelled. "Fifteen minutes!"

James looked at her, wide-eyed, in the mirror as she smiled sweetly back at him and carried on with her beauty regiment.

"I'm coming. How do I look?"

James had to smile before he saw her, remembering that she always had the same nervous tone in her voice whenever she asked that question.

Rainne stepped out of the bathroom and took a few steps toward the bed, spinning slowly so everyone could have a look.

James's breath hitched in his throat. She was dressed all in peacock blue and black. Her very short plaid skirt was adorned with a black belt that sagged on her hips. Hanging off one side was a pair of handcuffs, and on the other was a short choke chain with a padlock on it. A small portion of her legs showed between the bottom of the skirt and the tops of the blue and black striped thigh highs she wore. They were attached with little straps that disappeared under the skirt. James smiled to himself knowing she had a garter belt hidden underneath. The stockings stopped at a pair of blue Doc Marten boots tied with black laces, and she had strung little metal cartoony type charms through the laces. Above her belt was a long-sleeved blue shirt that looped at her thumbs and had rips through it. Her hair was in pigtails.

They were puffed out, curly, and they danced just past her shoulders. She had tied them with blue and black ribbons, and her hair had been streaked with blue hair dye. Their eyes met, and James fought the urge to kiss her black lips. “You look beautiful, baby.”

\* \* \* \*

Rainne smiled at him. She felt electrified. A mix of anticipation, fear, and adrenaline stormed her nervous system. So many things were possible tonight. They could win the band competition and get a record deal. They could finally catch Cameron and put an end to her nightmare once and for all. He could escape or hurt someone. They could lose the contest. She could die. She tried to put it out of her head, knowing it wouldn't do her nerves any good to worry about the what-ifs.

## Chapter 20

On the way to the show, Rainne stared out the window thoughtfully. She was trying to get her game face on for the show. She had been looking forward to this night for months. It was supposed to be fun, but instead she found herself scared shitless. She looked around the van at her friends and her fiancé. Her stomach rolled at the thought of any one of them being hurt or even disappointed. They had to catch Cameron, and they had to win.

“You all right?” James whispered in her ear as he gently squeezed the fingers he had been absently playing with.

She gazed into his eyes, knowing that that’s where her future lay. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just thinking.” She gave him her best nonchalant smile, but was pretty sure he didn’t buy it.

“Everything’s going to be fine. I promise,” he said at her temple before he whispered a kiss over it.

“Oh, my God!” Rebecca proclaimed from her seat.

Rainne looked up then to see the arena. It was insanity. There were hundreds of people lined up out front. Reporters and fans were swarming like locusts outside the stage door. Police and sheriff’s deputies were covering every inch of the property on foot and with dogs.

The convoy stopped near the stage door, and Rainne could see the sheriff’s deputies get out and secure the scene. “We ready?” she asked with a small thrill of excitement flowing through her system.

“Let’s rock!” the band members chanted together.

With that, the van door slid open and James jumped out onto the concrete. The band flowed out of the vehicle, waving to the crowd.

Rainne took a silent, steadying breath and stepped out of the van. She was instantly blinded by the reporters' cameras, and microphones were pushed in her direction.

"Rainne! How are you feeling?"

"Have you talked to Carol Stanton or Phillip McCray since their arrest?"

"Do you have any words for your Cameron Ellis?"

The questions seem never ending. It saddened her that most of them were here to get information on the company and her stalker. She tugged on James's arm for him to halt so she could address the media.

She turned to the reporters and cleared her throat. "Lately my life had been full of surprises. The family I thought I had didn't really exist, and the friends I've held on to over the years turned out to be more than family." She turned to see her bandmates watching her affectionately. "I found strength I never knew I had and stumbled into a life I never dreamed would be mine." She reached out as James grasped her hand and squeezed it gently. "I'm sorry I can't answer all of your questions tonight. We have more important things on the agenda. Now if you will excuse us, we have a competition to win." With that statement, she strolled toward the stage door, stopping a few times to sign autographs and shake hands.

Security opened the doors, and they all disappeared inside. They followed the signs that led them to their dressing room and went in to check to make sure all their equipment made it safely.

Rainne left the band in the room, and she and James went into the hallway. Rainne wanted to see the crowd that had accumulated.

Approaching the backstage area, she was cut off by a sour-faced girl dressed all in black.

James quickly jumped in front of her to shield her from what he thought was an assault.

"It's okay." She stepped around him. "This is Glory. She's in another band playing here tonight."

Glory straightened up and threw James a flirtatious smile. “That’s right. I am. I’m in the band that’s going to win.” Her smile turned to a sneer. “I’m offended that these other bands are even here when it’s obvious who’s going to go home with the record deal.”

Rainne couldn’t stand this girl. Her father owned the most overpriced music store in town, and she was sure to have a ridiculous laser show in-store trying to sway the judges in her favor. “Glory, the only thing offensive is the music your band will be playing...and...maybe your breath.” Rainne leaned in as if to tell her a secret. “Really, have you heard of Tic-Tacs?” she asked sarcastically.

Glory shot her a nasty look. “Ah, Rainne, so clever.” She smiled with no humor on her face. Turning to James, she rubbed his muscled arm. “Maybe after the show I could show you a good time, baby?”

James gently grabbed her wrist and pulled her arm off his. “I’m sorry, but I have plans with my fiancé.” He stepped back and put his arm around Rainne’s shoulder and placed a kiss in her hair.

Glory paled and stormed away angrily.

Rainne giggled softly. “That was fun. I haven’t seen her that mad since we toilet-papered her band’s bus.”

James looked at her, smiling. “Who is she?”

“Oh, she’s just some little, spoiled rich girl who can’t tell the difference between true punk rock and the bubblegum punk her band churns out.” She led him to the curtain and peered out.

The arena was full. Fans were pressed against the stage, their faces awash with anticipation. Reporters and police lined the walls. The doors in the back were open, and she could see people being searched and going through the metal detectors.

“We better get back to the dressing room. They’re starting in a few minutes,” James said at her ear, tugging on her a bit to lead her back.

Entering the dressing room, the band members were all smiles.

“Why all the happiness?” Rainne wondered aloud.



Rebecca held up a green laminated sheet with #5 on it. “We drew while you were gone and we’re last!” She was squealing in excitement.

James was confused. “That’s good?”

Rainne smiled up at him. “That’s awesome. You want to go last, especially during a competition. You will be the last one the judges and audience see before voting. Plus, you can make sure you don’t copy anybody else’s moves or introductions.”

They all moved to the backstage area to listen to the competition. The announcer was onstage starting the show.

“Hello, Fort Myers!” His voice boomed, trying to rile the crowd. “Welcome to the fifth annual battle of the bands! Tonight we have a hell of a show lined up. The fifth place winners will get a \$100 gift certificate to Melodies Music, located right here in Fort Myers. The fourth place winners will receive a \$250 gift certificate to Melodies Music. The third place winners will get a \$500 gift certificate to Melodies Music, and the second place will receive a \$1,000 gift certificate to, you guessed it, Melodies Music. The winner of this competition will receive a six-record recording deal with GMB Records.” He paused as the crowd applauded. “Are you ready, Fort Myers?” The crowd erupted in applause. “Let’s welcome to the stage a band from Tampa, Florida! The Chocolate Covered Kittens!” The audience cheered as the announcer ran from the stage and the band struck their first cord.

“Oh, I love these guys!” Annie said as they all swayed to the music.

The night was full of excitement, and electricity was in the air as they slowly went through the bands. Next up were the Zombie Eaters. Rainne thought they could have been a good band if the singer hadn’t been drunk and all their songs weren’t about doing drugs.

The third band to the stage was Glory’s band, Shenanigans. As suspected, the laser light show was more impressive than the music.

The fourth band was one of Rainne's favorite of the night, Oreos's Revenge. Not only were they a tight group, but nice guys, too.

The band left the stage with a "Good night, Fort Myers!" As the singer ran past Rainne backstage, he paused for a brief moment and smiled. "Hey, Rainne, good luck tonight."

Rainne called after him, "Thanks. You, too."

She looked at her bandmates and asked, "Are we ready?"

They all clasped hands in a tight circle and looked at each other.

Rainne slowly removed her sling and stretched out her shoulder. She smiled at her friends and shouted. "Are we ready?"

"Yeah!" they all replied loudly.

"Ready for what?" she shouted back.

"Ready to rock!" they all screamed in unison and hit the stage.

James watched as Rainne slowed in the darkness of the stage. She made it to the glowing X in the floor which showed her where to stand.

The announcer was onstage once again, introducing her band. "Fort Myers, give it up for your very own Noise Box!" He ran off stage as the crowd exploded with cheers.

The curtain opened as one singular blue spotlight shone on Rainne alone. "Let's hear some noise, Fort Myers!" Rainne screamed into the microphone, and the crowd was eating it up like hungry dogs.

\* \* \* \*

James heard a soft bass line being played in the background. It seemed to build ever so slowly as Rainne stepped up and took the mic.

"There are many things I will never know, many questions I'll never answer."

She sang softly as the drums added to the bass line.

"Books that will never be read and places I will never see."

The rhythm guitar started playing into the melody drifting through the air, and still it was building.

“As long as he loves me as I love him, I’ll never miss not witnessing the rest.”

The lead guitar struck a power cord and the stage exploded in color and sound. Rainne’s voice chimed in harmony with the band.

“Punk Rocks Warrior.”

They sang the chorus.

As the song came to a close, James’s chest was filled with pride at the crowd’s response. The sound was deafening. The band threw themselves into another more upbeat tempo song, and Rainne seemed in her element.

James faded back into the curtain and tapped his Bluetooth unit. “Report.”

“All good, boss,” Sam said. “She looks great, and they seem to be the favorite to win from what the crowd has been saying.”

James peeked out into the crowd as their second song stopped and they started up the third and last performance of the night. He spotted some commotion on the right side of the crowd and heard screaming that didn’t sound like fan appreciation.

“Ash!” he barked.

“I’m on it, boss,” Ash answered.

Before another word could be comprehended or another breath taken, total pandemonium broke out.

The first gunshot rang through the air, and the crowd panicked. Half of the people hit the floor, and the other half ran for the doors. The house lights went up, and another shot rang out. The sounds of people screaming flowed through the air.

James spied the band, still onstage, huddled together on the floor. He raced up, and Annie was yelling at an officer in the crowd to get an ambulance.

James looked down in horror to see Rainne had been hit and was lying in a puddle of blood, her face awash with agonizing pain. “Oh,

my god, no!” he screamed, dropping to the floor beside her. He tapped his Bluetooth unit. “We need an ambulance! Now!” he screamed. “Rainne’s down!” He bent down to her, trying to stay calm as he assessed her injuries.

“I’m okay,” she croaked, breathlessly. “I think it’s just a scratch.”

James ripped his shirt off as he lifted her skirt past her thighs. She was right. It was just a scratch, but a nasty one. She was leaking blood like a faucet. He pressed his shirt against the wound, trying to staunch the blood flow as she hissed in pain. “Sorry, baby,” he said, feeling the tears fill his eyes.

The paramedics rushed to the stage just then, and James shifted to her head.

They lifted her onto the gurney and wheeled her out into the parking lot.

\* \* \* \*

Rainne could hear the fans wishing her well as the police made a path for them to the awaiting ambulance, and she stuck her hand in the air with a thumb up. The crowd went wild. She smiled to herself as the doors closed and the muffled sirens could be heard.

She looked at James. “What happened?”

“Cameron,” he growled murderously. “Somehow he got past security.” He reached over and ran his fingers over her head. “Don’t be scared. Ash got him.”

*The second shot.* A small tremor snaked over her body. *It’s over.* Her body instantly felt relaxed, and she realized she had been tense for weeks and not even realized it.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, Rainne and James were packing up, getting ready to leave the hospital. It was nearing 4:00 a.m. and it had been an

eventful night. Her upper thigh had been grazed by Cameron's bullet and lodged itself in the back wall of the arena. She had needed twenty stitches to close the gash, and she was going to have a cane as a best friend for a few weeks. She had to smile at the walking aid. Annie and Rebecca had already decorated it with skulls and color.

Ash had caught up to Cameron just as he took the shot, and he had wasted no time in putting the next bullet in his head. He was dead, and she had mixed feelings over it, happy that the nightmare was over, but saddened that he couldn't have gotten some help for his illness. His death seemed so needless.

She was snapped out of her mental assessment when they all approached the exit doors of the hospital. There was a huge crowd looming outside. Reporters and fans were being held back by the police.

James put his arm around her shoulder, and they stepped through the doors and into the parking lot. They tried to make their way past the crowd when a tall man in a business suit approached them with two officers at his side. "Ms. Stanton," he stated. "I'm so happy you're okay. I'm sorry to catch you at such a crazy time..."

He was cut off by James. "We appreciate the well-wishing, but she really needs to be at home resting."

He stepped in their pathway. "I'm sorry. You don't seem to understand." He straightened up and fixed his tie. "My name is G.M. Benedict. I'm president of GMB Records."

Rainne froze. She felt her bandmates gather around her.

"You need to be informed that you've won the contest, and I'd like to see you in my office as soon as possible for the contract signings." He smiled at them.

Rainne was frozen in shock. Her friends, on the other hand, weren't. They jumped and screamed for joy. She took a deep breath and leaned into James's embrace. She had all but forgotten about the contest part of the night.

"Are you all right?" he asked. Concern lined his face.

She shook her head slightly. “Yeah,” she breathed out, slowly letting the good news sink into her pores. “Take me home, my punk rock warrior.” She smiled up at him.

“You got it, my punk rock princess.” He scooped her up into his arms and walked briskly to the awaiting car.

## **THE END**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

My name is Rachel Cron. I have lived in Fort Myers, Florida for over 30 years. I'm happily married and the mother of two. I'm also the grandmother of two. Growing up around English teachers and musicians, books and music have been a constant in my life. They have helped shape me into the person I am today. My inspiration for my books stem from my life, the people I've met, the things I've done or the things I have weathered through. Pair that with an overactive imagination and...here we are. I'm a firm believer in family and laughter. Why are we here if we're not enjoying ourselves?



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