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The FORGETFUL SPY

Lara Santiago



The Double Recall 1

The Forgetful Spy

Life is a series of choices.

Faltering Protocol agent, Rachel Miles, can't afford to bungle another mission, but her growing desire for Colin may ruin her well-laid plans. Choosing between doing her job the way her boss wants it done or giving in to her overwhelming attraction for a man she barely knows, she selects Colin.

Laurie's Peterson's life is comfortable, quiet and pleasantly boring until she meets an exciting, gorgeous stranger who won't take no for an answer. Should she risk her comfortable life and risk hurting the aunt who gave up everything to take care of her for a man she's just met?

Undercover agent, Colin Riley, loves two very different women. Rachel, outrageous, sensual and mysterious, who saves him from a murderous Columbian drug lord. And Laurie, the sweet librarian whose gentle innocence makes him yearn for a life he can't have.

How can he choose between them?

Especially once he realizes they're the same woman.

Sensuality Rating: **SCORCHING**

Genre: Romantic Suspense

Length: Full Novel (75,000 words)

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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THE FORGETFUL SPY

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Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this story to my kids. They 'did' help with this book by acting out a couple of fight scenes for clarity.

Thank you both for being so ecstatic about beating up on each other in the name of better writing.

I love you both more than life itself, and with this dedication, I hope I've persuaded you to pick out a very nice nursing home for me someday.

L.

THE FORGETFUL SPY

The Double Recall 1

LARA SANTIAGO

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Chapter 1

“I think I may have killed someone,” Laurie Peterson whispered. Saying the words out loud made her chest constrict.

She took a deep breath to calm her rioting nerves and the acrid smell of burnt coffee assailed her nose. Squeezing the already damp cloth straps of her purse between her nervous fingers, she glanced at the stern-faced police detective seated behind his desk. He didn’t respond to what Laurie considered a very shocking confession. His silence initiated a compulsive need to ramble and explain.

“I experienced a blackout or something and when I woke up...” She paused and chanced another glimpse at his face. The frown there wasn’t encouraging, so she stopped speaking completely and sent her focus to her lap.

Detective Hubbard remained motionless and quiet. Bravery wasn’t the strongest gene in her pool but she met his gaze again because the silence unnerved her. He stared at her, unblinking, arms crossed securely over his chest, his eyes narrowed. The silence stretched between them. Laurie glanced around to see if anyone else had listened to her confession.

No one seemed to care.

He finally blinked once.

“You ‘think’ you may have killed someone? Who was it?” His surly tone combined with the smirk shaping his mouth conveyed his obvious disbelief.

Laurie sighed inwardly. "I don't know."

"You don't know who you killed?"

He pushed back further in his chair, eliciting a squeaked protest, and re-focused his gaze to the ceiling. Laurie resisted the urge to correct his grammar.

The foolishness of saying the words out loud to another person convinced her she shouldn't have made this trip. The detective was probably calculating the fastest way to get her into a straight jacket and directly to the nearest psychiatric ward for a padded cell and a psyche evaluation.

Perhaps it was where she belonged. If she explained everything, she might get a one-way ticket anyway. Instead of leaping up and running to avoid prosecution and incarceration, she remained seated on the edge of the uncomfortable wooden chair facing his desk. Lack of sleep made her stupid. She'd wanted an opinion. She suspected she was about to get a lecture instead.

He dropped his head to pierce her with a cold stare. Certain a "crazy person" lecture was imminent, she was caught off guard a heartbeat later when a wide grin encompassed his mouth.

"Is this a joke? Did Colin send you to harass me?"

Tilting her head to one side she pursed her lips and frowned.

"Who's Colin?"

Detective Hubbard slid his gaze around the room as if searching for a hidden camera.

Ok, so maybe the missing time she'd experienced wasn't within the purview of the Millbrook City Police Department, but it wasn't a joke either. She'd driven thirty miles from her hometown this afternoon because she didn't want to confess to any of the local police officers she knew. Working part time at the local library she came in contact with law enforcement from time to time.

The vivid dream of fighting with a stranger was as fresh now as it had been when she'd awoken yesterday morning. In the dream, she'd struggled for her life against a burly attacker, wrestling for possession of the gun she held. The sudden bang of the gunshot, the smell of hot metal and spray of blood from her attacker completed the gory nightmare.

In the dream, a strong, triumphant emotion of relief ran through her like electricity, unlike when she woke to a feeling of horror at the memory this

morning.

At breakfast with her Aunt Fiona, Laurie had picked up the paper shocked to see by the date printed on the front page that three days had passed. Since her aunt didn't comment about a disappearance of any kind, she kept her fears close. She asked a few questions to ascertain what might have gone on while she'd been sleepwalking through three days.

What was more frightening than the wrong date on the paper was the lead story blazing on the front page regarding the mysterious shooting victim. Had she killed someone?

They hadn't identified the murdered man or shown his picture, but Laurie worried she'd done something appalling. The nightmare, fresh in her mind, seemed more memory than dream. She had convinced herself she was guilty of something.

Guilt had driven her to Millbrook and the unhappy detective seated before her now. It was clear she shouldn't have wasted the trip. Keeping her wild notions to herself was the best course of action. Panic at her foolhardy confession engulfed her.

Laurie stood abruptly and stepped away from the detective's desk. "Never mind. I'm sorry to have taken up your time."

He stood when she did. His face softened with compassion for a brief moment. "Have a seat, ma'am. You might as well tell me what's on your mind."

Laurie looked around the room once more. No one seemed remotely interested in hearing that she had recurrent bouts of missing time, including Detective Hubbard.

Her blackouts were increasing in number and length. Usually only a few hours would pass, but this week three days had gone missing. What had she done? Perhaps she didn't want to know.

In the dream she was skilled with a weapon but in her real life she'd never held a gun. The missing time with the new nightmares had disturbed her enough to bring her here, but not enough to make her stay.

"I've made a mistake." *A big one.* Laurie turned toward the door and made a hasty retreat.

"Wait," Detective Hubbard shouted behind her. The shrill ring from the phone on his desk almost made her heart stop beating, but had no impact on her

legs.

He snagged the phone and answered, "Hubbard."

Laurie slung her purse over one shoulder and didn't look back as she hurried to make her exit.

Taking an immediate right through the open door she shot towards the top step of a narrow dark stairwell. Luckily, she only had one flight of stairs to traverse before she escaped.

Fairly skipping down every other step in her haste to get away, Laurie kept the landing to the main entrance in view.

Once there, it was a sharp right, a final short flight of steps to reach the lobby, one last hallway and out the front door to freedom.

She hit the platform with forward motion on her side as her purse banged her ribcage. Rounding the corner to the final few steps, she plowed hard into a wide, muscular chest ascending the stairs. Her momentum and the law of physics conspired against her to cause the stumble. Weightless for a split second, she stiffened and closed her eyes as the hard wooden railing loomed ready to smack her forehead.

Instead of bouncing her skull off the railing and taking a tumble down the stairs, she felt a pair of strong arms wrapped around her, clenching her in a light embrace.

Physics and motion, however, wouldn't be ignored any longer and together they stumbled toward the lobby hallway. Laurie braced herself for a worse fall that didn't come.

It was a testament to the man's strength and balance that he kept them both on their feet instead of tangled in a broken heap at the bottom of the short flight of stairs.

The stranger clutching her tight managed to stabilize them against the wall midway down the steps.

Over her head she heard, "Whoa! What's your hurry, darlin'?"

"Sorry," Laurie said under her breath. "I need to go."

He relaxed his arms and she moved to pass, but tripped over his booted foot. She grabbed his arm to keep from falling the rest of the way down.

This time he hugged her even more firmly against his brawny body. He

backed down the remaining three steps until they were safely on the lobby level as she clung to him. It was not a hardship. He smelled very nice. The fear from threat of capture subsided in favor of learning about the man she held.

While her face was buried against his firm chest, she took a deeper breath of his clean masculine scent. She failed to release him when it was certainly prudent to do so.

“You okay?” His fingers brushed a tingling path down her spine stopping at her waist.

Laurie realized she’d let him distract her from escape and pulled away quickly. “Yes. Thank you.” Glancing into his dark brown eyes was yet another big mistake. Mesmerized, she squeezed his forearms. Her hands wouldn’t cooperate or let go of him.

He didn’t let go either. The hand grazing the belt at her waist squeezed gently as his delicious chocolate gaze held her rapt attention. “Are you sure?” He grinned. “I’m happy to hold on until you’re completely ready.”

Laurie inhaled again and wondered what was wrong with her. She suspected it was because she hadn’t been this close to a man in so long. He felt...wonderful. His fingertips traced a path of small circles up the back of her shirt from her waist to her shoulder blades. Prickles raced along her spine at being touched. Laurie melted closer to his body’s furnace-like heat.

Brushing a kiss at her temple, the stranger made her acutely aware she’d been alone far too long. The warmth of his lips burned into her forehead. She wanted more. Wanted his lips on hers. A kiss. She tilted her head to seek his mouth as her eyes slid shut for courage. His low moan of appreciation fueled her hunger and sent a shard of fear through her heart.

Popping her eyes open, Laurie was a mere breath away from the kiss she desired. She eased closer until she achieved contact. His firm mouth caressed her lips softly. The power of the touch sent her nerve endings into a full tailspin of sensation. Laurie relaxed and melted closer. The sizzle of his tongue brushing across lower lip woke her up.

Good heavens. What was she doing?

Laurie stiffened. “Please, let me go.”

“Sorry. I—”

Laurie slid past not wanting to hear whatever he was about to say. She

fought turning back for one more peek and lost. She couldn't control the urge of yearning curiosity. Still moving down the empty hall to make her escape, Laurie glanced over one shoulder.

Perched at the foot of the stairs, he watched her escape. Staring at him again, she caught his lazy perusal. He smiled in a sardonic bad boy way as if he'd naturally expected her to turn back. The captivating stranger simply took her breath away. He wasn't overly tall, perhaps just over six feet in height, but even a short glimpse told her he was lean, muscled and experienced. The longer second look confirmed her initial assessment. He was completely gorgeous and not her type at all.

What was her type? Probably a Mr. Boring Fish Lips Kisser.

The detective Laurie had been ready to confess all to came into view on the stairs when she glanced back a third time. The detective ignored her in favor of the man she'd bumped into.

"Colin! It's about time you got your ass down here..."

The rest of the detective's exuberant statement was cut off by the swoosh of the spring-loaded door snapping shut behind her as she exited the building. Running across the porch, then down the short flight of stairs to the parking lot, she forced herself not to look back anymore. She didn't stop until she was tucked inside her car with the doors locked.

Stupid. Stupid. Foolish idea.

But that kiss was worth the trip. Stop it. That barely qualified as a kiss. Until he licked you.

Laurie drove out of the parking lot refusing to acknowledge the impact of the stranger's lips on her wild imagination. The memory of his tongue tracing her lower lip pulsed through her vivid and lonely imagination.

She checked her rearview mirror repeatedly to ensure she wasn't being followed. As if she'd even know if someone was tailing her. Releasing a long breath, she vowed never to do this again. So what if she had blackouts, dreamed about shooting guns and snuck around in strange places? So what if she found a bloodstained white shirt stuffed in the far back of her closet?

So what if it was the shirt she'd worn in her nightmare as she pulled the trigger of a huge gun, wounding a faceless foe and causing the spray of blood. So what if the spot of blood on the sleeve of the strange shirt was an exact duplicate of the one in her dream?

* * * *

Colin Riley watched as the gorgeous blonde who'd crashed into him disappeared from sight. His mouth was on fire from the chaste kiss. Damn. Combined human combustion might have resulted if they'd made it to the French level. Without conscious effort, his body turned to follow her.

"Colin! It's about time you got your ass down here for a visit." His cousin punched him just below his shoulder distracting him from following her lovely ass out the double doors of the police station.

"What's up, Billy?" Nodding once at the door Colin asked, "Did you scare another girl away? Who was that?"

Billy shrugged seemingly unconcerned. "I don't know. Some silly chick babbling about blackouts and other nonsense. Glad you're here, man."

Colin glanced back at the door she'd run through. "She was kind of pretty."

Billy cocked his head to one side and gave him a quizzical look. "Nah. Too uptight."

"Well, she was pretty in a prim school teacher sort of way. Let's chase her down and I'll see if it turns out she's wild underneath all that proper exterior?"

"Forget it." Billy circled a finger around the side of his head indicating his opinion that the girl was crazy. "You want women for tonight, we can do better at any bar in town. Ready to tie one on like old times?"

"Hell, no. I'm leaving the country in the morning. Last time I left here with a hangover the size of Texas. I spent the longest flight of my life in the aircraft john puking my guts up. Not this time."

"New assignment?"

"Yeah."

“Anything exciting this time or the same old boring crap?”

Colin forced a practiced grin. “Same old boring crap. I’m headed for Europe. I’ll be trapped in some dinky office in London checking routine information for importers and exporters on the watch list.” Colin hated to lie. Hated that he was so good at it. He wasn’t going to Europe.

Billy shook his head. “You need to get a more exciting job with the government, dude.”

He nodded, sighed and pasted a practiced regretful look on his face for the benefit of his cousin. “Tell me about it.” *The truth was his ‘true’ job was plenty exciting.*

Colin glanced back to the door where the intriguing blonde with the sultry lips had disappeared. Shame she’d left. He imagined without a doubt that underneath her prim school teacher exterior rested the body and spirit of a siren.

If he hadn’t been leaving on assignment in the morning, he’d have chased her to find out for certain.

Chapter 2

Columbia, South America, 2 months later

“I’m going to fuck the whore in the blue dress tonight.” Luis Montoya announced. As second in command and top security man to the incumbent drug lord, Raoul Ortega, Luis could do exactly as he pleased. He stared over Colin’s shoulder to the backyard patio at the bevy of prostitutes milling around the luxurious outdoor pool. “Did you see her when she came in?”

Colin nodded even though he had no idea to whom Luis referred. He’d seen fifty women in any number of blue dresses at tonight’s gala extravaganza to celebrate Raoul Ortega’s recent ascension to power.

“Miguel,” Luis called to the staff bartender with a grin. “Set Tommy up with a drink, my treat.”

The blank-faced Miguel strolled from the far end of the carved leather and wood bar and placed a short, squat glass in front of Colin. He didn’t laugh at Luis’ joke. It was an open bar. In fact, it was Raoul’s treat.

Colin was known here as Tommy Callahan. He did low level grunt work for Luis. Tonight was his last night on this long assignment. Tomorrow the party would be over and all those who worked for Raoul Ortega would be in jail. Colin couldn’t wait.

“After the fireworks, I’m going to find her and fuck her until she forgets every other man she’s ever been with.” Luis downed another shot of tequila. He lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. The flash of his silver lighter caught Colin’s eye. There was a figure of a howling timber wolf etched on one side with the words ‘El Lobo’ underneath. The wolf.

Colin thought it was a very unoriginal reference.

“You should find a whore for yourself, Tommy.” Luis drained his glass

and slapped it to the counter as a curl of gray smoke rose above his head. Miguel refilled it immediately. "Go ahead. Pick out a girl, my treat." He laughed, because again, it was really Raoul's treat.

"Thanks, boss, I'll look around for one." Colin sank onto the barstool chair eager to drink to his own personal success. His drinking companion, Luis Montoya, would not share his enthusiasm over what he'd accomplished.

The tequila offered was a very top-shelf brand and Colin was mere hours away from finishing up this successful undercover mission. Unfortunately, he wouldn't have time to sample the women at tonight's party. He'd be gone before the planned midnight fireworks display.

By this time tomorrow he'd be back in the States. If he could swing it, he'd be drinking with his 'real' friends. The day after that, he'd hopefully resume his secret spy duties in America. Anticipation coursed through his veins. He couldn't wait to leave this drug-scourged existence. It was time to shed his most recent undercover identity, Tommy Callahan, gofer extraordinaire to Luis Montoya and his boss Raoul Ortega, drug lord extraordinaire.

Luis lifted his glass in toast. "Here's to good business, Tommy."

"*Salud!*" Colin raised the glass, tapping it once to Luis' and sucked down the amber alcohol. He hated tequila, much preferring Irish whiskey when he drank socially, but when in Columbia...

"You've done a good job for me since you've been here. Tomorrow things will change for the better, you'll see." Luis motioned for the bartender to fill Colin's glass again.

"Sir?" Miguel's vacant expression remained in place as he spoke and poured another shot in Colin's glass. "Would you mind having one of your men check the back door behind the kitchen?" Miguel glanced at Colin then back at Luis. "I noticed one of the guests heading there a few minutes ago. He hasn't returned."

Luis nodded and stubbed out the spent cigarette in the red dragon shaped ceramic ashtray on the bar. "You mind checking it out, Tommy? I've got to go look for a blue dress."

The bartender slid his dispassionate gaze from Luis to Colin.

"Sure thing." Colin nodded, downed the tequila shot in one swallow as he slid off the barstool and headed to the kitchen by way of the swinging door next to

the far end of the bar.

He paused at the metal door and called over his shoulder, "Have fun once you find that blue dress."

Luis smiled and lifted his glass as Colin disappeared through the doors. He figured it was the last time Luis would get laid by a woman until he was out of prison. Glancing at his watch, Colin cursed the second shot which made his vision blurry. He squinted to focus. Two minutes after ten o'clock.

Just less than two hours left in this identity. He entered the hallway leading to the kitchen as the door swung shut behind him. Dropping his arm after pushing through the swinging door, Colin shuddered as his stomach cramped sending him staggering into the wall. The sudden tunnel vision enveloped him before he could take a breath. He slid to his knees, pitching forward onto the terra cotta tiles wondering if he was about to die. The cramps in his midsection subsided marginally, but the ability to remain conscious did not.

Compromised on his last day. Damn it. The only remaining question was whether he would die from the poison or if he'd wake up in the soundproof part of Raoul's basement.

Colin sent up one last plea for death as blackness engulfed him.

* * * *

Rachel Miles eased the door closed to the second floor study, assured from careful observation that she was alone. The enormous party downstairs was in full swing, leaving her plenty of time to steal the information she was here to collect.

Clicking the lock in place, she crossed the room to hack into the computer sitting on the ornately carved wooden desk. Along the way, she glanced at the room's masculine dark reds and darker browns along with the decorator's heavy-handed Spanish matador art influence. The bright style was probably considered a success of color and art for a Columbian drug lord. Rachel, however, easily ignored the blatant beautification in favor of her task.

Laying her petite, silver beaded purse on the desk, Rachel hiked up her dress to retrieve the device hidden in a special pocket attached to the thong underwear nestled between her legs. It was the only place to hide the small gadget without fear of its discovery during the standard body frisk and personal search

required to enter the party tonight.

Raoul didn't trust anyone to enter without first being felt up. With her mission tonight to steal all his contact information and supply routes, he was perhaps vindicated. The security men Raoul trusted to keep spies out were not competent enough to stop her.

The ice blue dress she wore clung so tightly to her body there wasn't a single place other than her underwear to hide anything anyway. The guard assigned to frisk her tonight had squeezed her breasts repeatedly as a smirk shaped his mouth. He had also grabbed her ass with both hands, rubbed his crotch against her once or twice, but didn't thankfully stick his hand between her legs. As part of her cover as a prostitute for the evening, she'd winked at him and smiled instead of going with her first instinct, which was to kick his balls to his ribcage.

The guard had leered at her in return when she smiled. He slapped her butt as she edged away, but she hadn't been singled out as he had done the exact thing to every other girl he'd frisked. It was maybe the closest he'd come to getting laid tonight.

Shrugging aside the memories of her arrival, her dress still hiked to her thighs, Rachel reached for the device in the specially created hidden pocket. It promptly snagged on her undies and wouldn't release. She pulled harder, but it simply wouldn't budge. Sighing deeply, she slid her fingers up to her waist and removed her panties entirely. The metal prongs at the end of the device were hopelessly and permanently attached to the frayed silk.

Conscious of her time constraints she placed the device next to the computer port and accessed the computer. Luckily, the wireless transmitter didn't need to be inserted into the computer. She entered the user ID and password she'd memorized for this mission. Clicking on the appropriate icon, the program she sought to copy opened without incident. The device on the desk, still attached to her panties, flared to life with a hum and a green light indicating it was working.

"Red Angel, do you copy." The radio buzzed to life in her ear vibrating against the fine hairs. Physically she didn't react, as she'd been trained, but her heart skipped a beat, as it did every single time. She hadn't gotten the hang of having someone besides her own annoying subconscious talking in her head.

"Copy, Dark Spirit." Rachel responded to her partner, Francine "Frankie" Belle.

“Status?”

“Working on it.” Sighing, Rachel wondered why it seemed like she was constantly being tested while in the field. She’d been a fully certified Protocol spy for over a year. However, she’d yet to undergo a mission unaccompanied.

“How much longer?”

“Less than ten seconds. You should start receiving images any moment.”

“Copy that.” The double click of Frankie’s radio signing off meant Rachel was alone with her thoughts again.

While she didn’t have a problem partnering with Frankie, she often wondered why her boss, Paul Kelly, didn’t trust that she was ready for solo missions.

Glancing at her underwear bunched up on the desk as the device copied, compiled and transmitted the information made her roll her eyes to the ceiling and heave a deep sigh. Although her missions had always been labeled completely successful, they were not without challenges, and most likely why she wasn’t trusted to go alone.

Going commando for tonight’s mission was a small price to pay. Stealing Raoul’s files to place immediately into her boss’s hands without a trace was a job rife with difficulties. At least tonight’s only casualty would be her panties and not a person.

Two months ago she’d kept her underwear on, but battled with an employee who’d unexpectedly come back to the office she was in the middle of robbing. He’d caught her red-handed. The sly look in his eyes, as he’d locked the door to prevent her escape, had quickly changed to one of perverted lust.

“Suck my cock and I’ll let you go,” he’d said with a smarmy smile. Not giving her another moment to consider an affirmative answer he’d crossed the room quickly.

Shifting her gaze to his tenting fly as he neared, she’d pulled the gun out of the waistband at the small of her back and threatened him instead of shooting him outright like she’d been trained. She’d hesitated, losing the element of surprise. He’d laughed and lunged for the gun. They wrestled for control of her weapon and it discharged. The shot to his heart and accompanying spray of blood ended the disturbing turn of events.

Ultimately, that had been considered a successful mission as well. His

death didn't eat at her soul like she thought it should have. Perhaps if he hadn't been about to force her to 'suck his cock' as punishment for the intrusion, she might have been more upset at having killed him.

Frankie had informed her later at the mission-conclusion briefing that a Protocol clean-up crew made the shooting look like a suicide. Her gun had been confiscated, serial numbers filed off and left at the scene fastened securely in the culprit's hand. They also implicated him in an embezzlement scheme gone bad as a reason for why he'd done himself in.

Ironically, after surveying the dead man's office, the clean-up crew had discovered that was the true reason he'd been working late that night and caught her.

Ignoring the pinch of guilt at taking his life, Rachel let go of her memories and focused back on the mission at hand. Getting caught stealing Raoul Ortega's files would certainly result in more than any cock sucking on her part.

The flashing green light signaled the process was complete. Rachel closed down the program leaving the computer exactly as she'd found it. As planned, she ran the inside front hem of her dress over the keys to eliminate any prints and grabbed the device still attached to her panties.

"Dark Spirit, this is Red Angel. Transmission is complete. Do you have it all?"

"Copy that."

"What's my egress?"

"Hold on."

Rachel couldn't detach the device from the skimpy material so she shoved the entire mass into her tiny evening purse. The tech scientists at Protocol headquarters would have to detach the device from the silk. They'd probably get a good giggle out of it and as a consequence she'd never be allowed to go on missions alone.

"Too much security on the first floor. Use egress plan B. Do not engage," Frankie's soothing voice whispered in her ear.

"Copy. Egress plan B. Stealth mode."

"See you at the rendezvous point in forty minutes, Red Angel. Good job. Dark Spirit out."

Rachel noted the time on her fancy gold bracelet watch and smiled at Frankie's customary 'good job' remark. "Thanks. Forty minutes, check. Red Angel out."

She made her way back across the room to the door. The spiky heels of her shoes had made divots in the thick rug. She slipped her shoes off and quickly backtracked, toeing the holes with her bare feet to eliminate her trail.

The naughty feel of going without underwear made her wish she had a regular sex partner to share 'benefits' with once she returned to base. It was unlikely, given that she only spent time at Protocol headquarters either getting ready to deploy on missions, planning for the next mission or training with the other Protocol agents.

Fraternization with co-workers was prohibited. Besides the others were all women. She desired a man. One with a big cock would be nice, although as the air breezed up to caress her inner thighs, she decided she wouldn't even turn down a little cock if it was offered.

The dress she wore tonight sported a hip high slit on one side for easy access. She slipped her shoes back on, careful not to leave marks in the carpet. The continued rush of open air between her legs with each step made her remember it had been a long time since she'd participated in any carnal activities.

Her escape from the den was unhindered. Making her way to the servant's quarters' stairs was equally effortless.

Rachel climbed the uncarpeted wooden steps gingerly toe testing for squeaky treads as she went along. She ascended to the top step without a single sound. Pausing a moment to balance, she peeked around the edge to survey the hallway. Her egress was down the long hall where the servant's room doors were lined up like soldiers at attention.

From her study of the house blueprints during mission planning, she knew the door at the end of the hall directly to her right was a small broom closet.

Entering the hall she counted the doors on the right hand side. The one third from the end was the plan 'B' egress route she intended to take. She strolled quietly along the polished length of hardwood floor and made it halfway to her destination when the door to the room she headed for suddenly opened. She froze only a millisecond before backpedaling a step and twisting to run the other way.

The stairs were her best option, unless it was the planned exit of whoever had opened the door to the room she had almost entered.

Heart hammering in her chest at the idea of being caught by one of Raoul Ortega's thugs and visions of the rumored torture chamber housed in the compound's basement, Rachel sped her pumping legs faster.

A man's voice echoed down the expanse behind her, though she only heard three frightening words. Any further conversation was lost in the pulse-pounding fury of her unplanned escape.

* * * *

Colin wasn't dead.

Fuck.

He opened his eyes a crack expecting to see the gray cinderblock walls of the basement. Raoul had built the 'information room', as he'd called it, complete with soundproofed walls. During his short time here, Colin had heard endless tales of the many victims taken inside the room as whole men. All had come out less than men, if the grisly rumors were to be believed.

Widening his gaze didn't help. The diffused light in the room cast shadows, but didn't illuminate anything. It was too dark to see. Damn it. Where was he?

He sucked in a deep breath filling his lungs. It didn't smell like the blood, sweat and tears from the previous victims of Raoul's wrath. Where else would Raoul put him if not the information room? Straining his eyes, Colin's relief was short-lived. Wherever he was, someone was in the room with him.

A light snapped on, showering the room in enough radiance to cause an ache between his eyes. Squinting in pain, he scanned the room. Through the glow of light, he found the angry expression of Miguel, the bartender from downstairs.

Colin blinked a couple of times to adjust to the light and sent a questioning glare to his captor. Miguel turned his back and crossed the room to sit in a chair positioned near the door of the small bedroom he occupied. Colin rested on the bed.

Another more disturbing realization became immediately apparent. He couldn't move. Lifting his head he understood the problem immediately.

"Fuck! Why handcuffs, damn it?" He tugged at the restraints attached to a

sturdy iron-spindled headboard. Ropes secured his ankles to the matching iron-spindled footboard making movement a luxury. He didn't understand why he was bound to a bed and not in the basement if they'd discovered he was an undercover agent.

Miguel stared at him for a long while without answering. "Serena wants you that way," he finally said. The hatred in his tone was one that Colin recognized as jealousy.

Tugging at the restraints was pointless, but Colin yanked as hard as he could anyway. "Let me go. You can have Serena. I don't want her."

"She don't want me. She wants you. Tonight." Miguel shook his head as if in disbelief that his precious Serena was interested in Colin. "Now that you're awake I'll go tell her you're ready for her."

"No. Wait. Raoul will torture me to death if I screw around with his only daughter."

Miguel sneered in response. His attitude didn't bode well for friendly compound camaraderie either. Everyone knew what happened if you screwed with Serena. It was a one-way ticket to an expedient dirt nap by way of the basement torture room.

Serena Ortega liked men. She liked fucking them. Once she grew tired of her stud for the week, a hint would be dropped to Raoul and the stud was never seen again. Ever.

Colin knew personally of three men who'd approached Serena with the intent of winning her over so they could ask for her hand in marriage and be the next big man under Raoul. Unfortunately for them, Raoul expected Serena to marry a man he chose, if he ever found anyone worthy for his perfect daughter.

Miguel crossed his arms, closed his eyes to a slit and grunted. "You shouldn't have tempted her."

"I didn't do anything to tempt her?" Colin pulled on the handcuffs. The bite of the metal circlets cut into his already chafed wrists. "Don't do this, Miguel."

"I do what *she* tells me. Not you. She'll be here to keep you company once the fireworks display starts at midnight."

Colin twisted his left wrist and bent his head back trying to read the dial, but couldn't see. "What time is it?"

Miguel shrugged again and walked to the door.

At his casual dismissal, an inhuman growl launched from Colin's throat before he could stop it. He flailed violently, yanked at the handcuffs with all his strength and only accomplished further wrist abrasion.

Miguel wrenched the door handle open, turned to Colin and watched him struggle against his bonds for a moment.

"I wouldn't call attention to yourself by yelling, Tommy. If anyone else finds you before Serena does, they'll go straight to Raoul. There isn't a man on this compound that couldn't figure out who you're waiting for and rat you out."

Sucking in a breath to temper his anger, Colin whispered, "Right."

"Better to be quiet and enjoy her attentions. Perhaps Serena won't tell her father about your indiscretion." He laughed. "But don't count on it."

Along with her taste for every possible forbidden man, Serena had an appalling reputation in the bedroom. It was whispered that her kink level was set for kill. She liked to inflict pain. She liked to see blood. Unfortunately for her victims, her version of BDSM didn't include a safe word.

Colin glanced at his restraints. Serena wanted him tied down for her pleasure. It didn't bode well for him at all.

Miguel lingered at the door a moment longer and said, "Vaya con Dios."

"Fuck you." The door closed on Miguel's laughter several moments later.

Colin rattled the handcuffs again. It was unproductive to ponder any plans Serena had in store for him. Nothing short of a miracle was going to help him now.

Going out in the middle of a sexual experience wasn't necessarily a bad idea, but he'd rather not be tied down or beaten bloody by Serena as her latest conquest.

While there was a certain level of thrill-factor associated with the idea of bondage, Colin much preferred rolling around with a woman as sweat glistened off their satisfied bodies. Lips, tongues, fingers whirling in motion against each other licking, sucking, stroking, kissing, fucking...

He sighed. Getting a hard-on right now would not help him. Colin needed to get free. He would do anything to accomplish this one goal. Perhaps he could convince Serena to let him go.

A sharp mirthless laugh erupted from his throat at the foolish thought. Doubtful. The more productive idea was to beg her not to fuck him to death. The irony being that he'd avoided Serena the entire two months of this assignment. Mere hours away from freedom, his luck had run out.

At midnight during the loud fireworks display for tonight's guests, he'd planned to be outside of the compound walls and sailing through the woods surrounding the place. By zero thirty hours his partner, Zack Mahon, would be waiting to pick him up. Together they'd evacuate before the pre-dawn take over the next day.

By noon tomorrow the compound would be empty and all of the previous occupants would be locked up in jail awaiting trial.

Colin had only planned on staying in the country long enough to be seen at the local jail arrested on drug charges like all the others to keep up his façade. A clean undercover identity in a foreign country was priceless.

Glancing around the shadowed small room, he had no sense of the time. Colin kicked at the ropes at his ankles. If he didn't show up, the raid would be compromised. They wouldn't attack unless he made it to the zero thirty meet with Zack. Fuck. Anger for all the wasted time here strangled his mind with injustice until he heard a disturbing noise.

The rattling door handle to his room signaling his doom sent him into a mild panic. He wasn't ready for blood and sex.

Chapter 3

Rachel heard the man say three unnerving words, “Vaya con Dios.” *Go with God.* She expected a bullet to her back when the stranger laughed. The finality of the message sent a chill through her veins. The muscles along her spine tensed up and waited for the impact.

Once safely hidden, Rachel realized the stranger’s attention was apparently not on her. No bullet pierced her flesh as she escaped.

Rachel reached for the broom closet handle willing it to be unlocked. It was. She ducked inside and pulled the door to her barely in time to avoid being seen by the man exiting the door of her planned evacuation of Raoul’s mansion.

Providence put her in a position to hide instead of walking right into the chest of the man leaving her alternate egress route. It was another mission ‘challenge’ she was grateful to have evaded.

Timing was everything and her guardian angel was definitely working overtime tonight. She listened to the man exit down the stairwell she’d just come up. More providence.

Rachel counted to ten and took a peek out of the slit of the open closet door. She didn’t want to call Frankie and report the complication, but she had no choice. Glancing at the stairwell opening, she didn’t see anyone. She took a deep breath and tapped her earring to activate her transmitter. Time to check her options.

“Dark Spirit, this is Red Angel.”

“Go.”

“How does my primary egress look right now?”

“Dismal. Why?”

Rachel leaned her forehead against the closet doorframe.

“An unscheduled male just departed the room I’d planned to leave through. He’s gone, but he shouldn’t have been there.”

“Shit. Give me a second.”

Rachel only had time to exhale before Frankie came back with her answer. “Primary egress is not an option. Proceed with secondary option. Use extreme caution.”

“Copy. Proceeding to secondary egress with prudence.”

“Keep in touch.”

“Right.” Rachel tapped her earring and disconnected. She’d turn her transmitter back on later to keep in touch. For now she didn’t want any surprise voices in her head until she hit the woods.

She tiptoed to the third door from the end, grabbed the handle and wrenched it open quickly sliding inside in case the man came back up the stairs.

The small room was shadowed with the exception of a small lamp near the bed. Illumination-wise, it was a poor substitution for a good flashlight. Rachel squeezed her eyes shut in order to acclimate her vision to the level of darkness.

Opening her eyes, Rachel’s gaze first lit on a narrow iron-spindled bed that stood next to the nightstand where the light shown. She noticed the handcuffs next. They circled the wrist of a hand. The body of a man was outlined on the bed. Blinking again she saw he wore a white collared shirt, unbuttoned at the throat, sleeves rolled up and jeans.

She didn’t see any blood. Was he dead?

Movement at the headboard startled her and she stifled a scream. The sound of metal scraping metal screeched.

Ah. Not dead after all. Good.

In the low light, she noticed another set of handcuffs bound his other arm to the far side of the bed. His boot-encased feet had ropes wrapped securely around his ankles. The frayed ends dangled off the footboard. He wasn’t going anywhere and thus was no threat to her regardless of his being alive. She released a breath and searched for the closet and her escape path.

“Who are you?” came a whisper from the pillow area of the bed.

Rachel declined to answer his query. He didn’t have a need to know. Ignoring him to continue her escape, she sidled past the foot of the bed having

spied the closet on the other side of the room. Mirrored sliders caught the reflection of the low light as she shifted the left one in its track to marry up with the other.

“Wait. Take me with you.” The man’s desperate voice, no longer a whisper, caressed her senses. His voice, dark and sensual, made her libido come to rapid attention.

Whirling in surprise at the subtle intrusion on her mission, Rachel approached the bed. Going against all her training in situations such as these, she reached out to snap the other bedside lamp on to see him better. Bathed in a pale yellow glow, Rachel sucked in a breath.

The captive was a gorgeous man.

Shaggy black hair dusted the collar of his shirt. Three days worth of stubble graced his jaw. His gaze, focused intently on her face, drilled a path straight through her. Thick, dark expressive eyebrows framed his sincere chocolate brown eyes, but his mouth was what fascinated her the most. His full lips, shaped as if from Cupid’s famous bow, were unquestionably made for sinful delights. Straight white teeth peeked out from his beautiful parted mouth. Rachel took another breath and scanned his body stretched out on the bed.

Beneath the linen of his shirt, arm muscles flexed against his bonds bringing attention to the fact he was immobilized. Wide shoulders rested against the base of a single pillow. Following the line of his body to a narrow waist, she watched as an impressive bulge appeared beneath the fly of his jeans. A smile tugged at her lips and without conscious effort she glanced at her watch to check her mission parameters and time frame.

“Do we have time?” The low murmur of his voice sent her pulse skidding rapidly. Rachel started to nod, but caught herself. She couldn’t seem to tear her gaze away from his body quite yet.

A thrill of anticipation zipped to her core as she ticked off his beautiful attributes, one by one, on her mental inventory of what made up a perfect man’s physical qualities. This man possessed all of them plus a couple of traits she’d add to her list. He squinted and ran his gaze from her face to her knees and back. The intensity of the look reminded her that she lacked panties. Her core clenched in need and a gush of appreciative wetness seeped between her legs coating her lower lips.

Rachel swallowed hard to get hold of herself. His question finally made it

through her lustful reverie.

“Time...for what?”

He grinned and the sexy, sultry, mystery captive morphed into a man she had to have. She moved closer to the bed without memory of getting there.

“For whatever you’ve got planned?”

Sex. That was what she wished she had planned. She slid her gaze up and down his body once more and licked her lips in anticipation of the delights he could inspire. More if she were to release his bonds.

The rattle of his handcuffs against the metal of the headboard startled her back to reality. What was she thinking of doing? He was a stranger.

“Help me get free. And I promise I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Why are you tied up?”

He exhaled a deep breath. “It’s a long story.” He turned his head and glanced at the door. “Is the door locked?”

Rachel nodded. She checked her bracelet watch again surprised that only four minutes had passed since she’d entered the room.

“Would you mind putting that chair under the door handle? I don’t want us to be interrupted.”

She crossed the room and secured the ladder-backed chair under the door handle checking to reassure herself it was indeed locked.

Rachel spied the open closet door and her chest tightened with anger. She had a mission. What was she doing? She shook her head and abandoned her foolish plan for a quickie with this stranger. Her task to escape took precedence over her ardent libido. She crossed the room, focused only on the closet door and tuned out his repeated and now very urgent attempts at conversation.

The built-in shoe rack made a perfect ladder for her to climb and open the attic access panel. She readied her escape path for egress ignoring his whispered pleas along with her own blatantly inappropriate desires in the process.

“Fuck. What do I have to do? Take me with you. Please.”

The please penetrated her trance. The attic access door was open and ready for her to climb through. Rachel shimmied back down the shoe rack and turned toward the bed.

Her hands pressed to her hips. “What do you want me to do?”

“Help me get loose.” He scanned her body pausing at her breasts for several seconds. “I’ll do anything.”

A wicked thought occurred to her and a grin flashed before she could stop it. “Anything?” she asked suggestively.

“Yes.”

“What did you do to warrant being tied down? I know you said it was a long story,” she glanced at her watch and smiled. “You have thirty seconds to explain it to me.”

Taking a deep breath, he shook his head slightly. “If I only had thirty seconds, then I’d plead my case. I must get free.” His eyes bored through her. “I have to meet someone tonight. Life or death.”

“You’re not meeting the man who left you here?”

“No.” He tugged at the restraints. The metal of the handcuffs clanked against the headboard. “Someone else.”

She pondered his short explanation and stared at him. The bulge below his fly had increased to an impressive ridge. Her core tightened in unquenched desire. Her gaze traveled to his legs and the powerful thighs encased in denim. The fabric stretched molding to his muscular flesh as he pulled at the ropes binding his ankles.

“See anything you want?”

She shot a quick gaze to his face and his sardonic smile greeted her.

“Yes, as a matter of fact.”

His eyes narrowed as if in disbelief of her affirmative answer and what it implied. After a few seconds, a smile again shaped his mouth. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

“If that’s a line, trust me, you don’t need it.” Rachel was about to implode with an unrelenting thirst for sex. She kicked off her stilettos and leaned closer to the bed.

“Did you come into the compound tonight with the other girls for...um...dates?”

“I came in with them, but not to get a date.” She hiked her dress up around

her thighs and put a knee on the bed. He pushed out a breath as if surprised.

“What *did* you come for?”

“That’s a secret.”

“I can keep a secret.” His eyes widened and shone with something akin to trustworthiness. She silently applauded his effort. His expression was very sincere, but she wasn’t telling him why she was here.

“I’m sure you can. But I’m still not going to tell you.” The light of hope died in his eyes. “Let me take a look at your handcuffs at least. I don’t have a key on me, but maybe...” she trailed off, climbed up on the bed resting on all fours.

Crawling over him to get a better look at his bonds, she had straddled his warm body before prudence prevented her from touching him. The second her body came into contact with his she had to take a calming breath and resist the urge to lower her breasts into his face. He lifted his head twisting to watch her as she studied the handcuffs.

“I have lock picks, but it’ll take a minute or two.”

“I’d be so grateful.” The whisper of his words caressed her and the intimate position of her body covering him seeped through.

She retreated turning to see his intense focus. “Oh yeah. How grateful?”

He laughed. “So grateful you’d scream ‘you’re welcome’ by the time I’d finished thanking you.”

She slid down his body until her mouth was lined up with his. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers making the first contact.

Magic.

Rachel put her hands on his face, slanted her mouth over his and sucked his tongue into her mouth. He moaned, which unleashed a torrential amount of fluid from her lower half. Her clit pulsed with desire as their hungry tongues collided.

She pressed her hips forward and the ridge of his cock throbbed against her pubic bone. Shifting to line up her lower half with his a little better, she prepared to scratch her itch against his growing erection.

With the next push of her hips, he responded in kind. She ground her crotch against him trying to hit the most sensitive spot but couldn’t quite hit the place she needed for gratification. She broke the kiss panting and studied his

restraints again.

“Let me taste you.”

“What?”

His gaze fell to her breasts. “Lower the strap of your dress.”

The sexy suggestion sent a punch of lust to her midsection. In slow motion to make the anticipation last, Rachel pulled the strap down exposing her breast with the visibly peaked nipple. Carefully she guided the distended tip to his mouth. He latched on with such forceful gusto, she almost came from the power of the suction he exerted. Instead, she moaned out loud and relaxed.

After sucking on her for several heart pounding moments, he stopped the wicked pleasure long enough to whisper, “Now the other one.”

Rachel hesitated until he asked, “Please?”

She lowered the other strap pushing her second breast to his waiting lips. The tug of sensation from his teeth grazing the tip sent a pulse from nipple to clit. Her pussy clenched with uncontrollable need.

“Ohmigod,” she whispered unable to withdraw. She was out of her mind and lost in the electrifying pleasure marching through her body.

The luscious suction stopped.

“Take the cuffs off. I’ll make you come.”

The word ‘come’ from his passionately uttered statement nearly brought the release she sought.

She eyed the handcuffs again.

He licked his lips and sent his gaze down her body to where she rested. Her dress was bunched up around her thighs where her open legs straddled across his midsection. His jeans enclosed hard cock rested against her pussy lips.

“Or you could slip your panties off, straddle my face and I’ll just lick you.”

The words ‘I’ll just lick you’ reverberated through her body like the vibration from a giant gong banged with a sledge hammer.

“I’m not wearing any panties.” Her whispered confession sent another violent wave of desire pulsing through her veins.

His pupils widened. "Show me."

Her lungs pushed out a deep breath as the vision of his tongue on her clit danced through her brain. Rachel's hips lifted off his body. She sat up straddling his middle, nipples exposed and pulled the hem of her dress to her waist revealing her auspicious lack of undergarments.

He closed his eyes a moment. "Straddle my face."

"I don't think—"

"Let me taste you." He barked it like a command and she wanted to obey. Correction, she had to obey. Her rational mind was no longer in control of her actions. Instead, her sex-starved libido had taken power. Gratification was the new mission objective.

Rachel inched her pelvis closer. She stood over him a moment and let him eye her pussy. Holding the hem of her dress in the clenched fingers of one hand, she sank over him positioning her knees on either side of his shoulders. She wrapped her free hand on the iron headboard for balance and lowered herself to his waiting mouth.

The breath from his labored breathing caressed her sensitive lower lips first. Then he touched her with his tongue.

Exquisite pleasure thrummed from her core and out the top of her head the moment his mouth closed over her sensitive flesh. The rough texture of his whiskers tantalized her thighs. His tongue swept along her lips lapping her up, drinking from her and tickling her clit.

She groaned on the very brink of climax as his busy mouth pleased her. Moments passed as she panted in ecstatic frenzy, her climax building to a peak never reached before with every lick, stroke and suck of his mouth. He put his lips around her clit and sucked hard. Once. Twice. He growled as if in appreciation of her flavor and the vibration from his throaty moan sent her over the screaming edge of orgasm.

Waves of bliss crashed across her fevered skin. She shuddered as the pleasure became too much to bear. On quivering legs she stood halfway into a crouch to keep from smothering him.

"Come back. I want more."

"I need a second," she panted. Rachel barely recognized the low gratified sound of her own voice. She dropped the dress, tenting it over his head.

“Your second is up and I can’t reach you. Quit teasing me,” came his muffled and amused response.

Rachel shifted backwards sliding her front along his warm body until their mouths lined up. She searched his eyes for words to express her appreciation, her gaze found his mouth wet with her orgasmic juices.

Without hesitation, she lowered her face and devoured his mouth tasting her own musky flavor still coating his lips. Wishing they had more time, Rachel withdrew as a pang of panic slid in her mind. Time!

Shit. *What time is it?*

She pulled away and checked her watch. Just over twelve minutes had passed. She wasn’t late...yet.

“I’ve got to go.” She lifted off his torso glancing over her shoulder at the open closet door waiting for her to make her escape.

“Wait. Open the handcuffs first. Please?”

Rachel felt his body tense beneath her and he tugged at his restraints.

She pushed out a quivering breath. “I’ll try.”

Fingers trembling from her recent climax, Rachel’s hands plunged into her sophisticated hairdo to retrieve the lock picks she always carried. Ruining the sleek French twist and leaving tendrils of hair floating around her face, she went to work on unlocking one handcuff. He pulled the cuff taut against the headboard so she could work.

She was going mostly by feel since the inadequate light didn’t help her cause. Precious seconds ticked as she wrestled with the lock. She was about to give up when she was rewarded with the sound of a click and the cuff opened.

Wrist free, he drove his fingers into the locks of her ruined hairstyle and pulled her down for a kiss.

“Thanks,” he murmured. “What’s your name, darlin’?”

She pulled away. She shouldn’t tell him. “Rachel,” her satisfied libido whispered traitorously.

He didn’t respond for a moment seemingly digesting her name or perhaps archiving it. He stared at her with an unreadable expression. “I’m Tommy.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Tommy.”

Releasing herself from his grasp, she smiled and crawled over his chest to start on the other lock.

“Not to ruin your concentration but what time is it?”

“Almost midnight. About five ‘til.”

“Fuck. I need to be out of here before midnight.”

“Why were you here in the first place?”

“Serena Ortega wants me.”

Rachel felt the blood drain out of her face. “Shit. Serena’s bad news.” She’d read a blurb about the sadistic tendencies of Serena Ortega with regard to hapless men in the mission report dossier during the planning phase for this job.

He grinned. “Which is why I’m so grateful.”

“That makes two of us.” Rachel smiled and wished foolishly that the dim light of the room hid the flash of heat in her cheeks. It probably didn’t. “I’m sorry there wasn’t time for—”

“Next time.” He cut her off with a grateful smile. “Let’s just say you owe me.” He winked.

The click of the second lock came faster. He snatched his hand from the cuff, which clanked against the headboard now empty of its captive

“Thank you.” He rubbed his hands together as if to initiate circulation.

Rachel removed herself from his warmth and slid off of the bed landing onto one of her shoes.

“What about the ropes?” She pointed at his ankles. “I didn’t bring a knife. No place to hide it in my outfit.” She patted down her sleek dress.

“I have one.” He pulled at his belt buckle and a wide pointed knife popped out. He bent at the waist and went to work on the ropes binding him to the bed.

Rachel rearranged her dress slipping her straps back in place on her shoulders. She bent to pick up her shoes and slipped them on. Turning toward her escape route, she grabbed her purse from the top shelf in the closet and readied herself to leave. Tommy finished cutting himself loose and bounded off the bed.

She’d done a good deed, received a mind-blowing orgasm for her trouble and now she needed to complete her mission and get out.

“Good luck,” she called over her shoulder and stuck her foot on the first step of the shelf.

“Wait. I’ll go with you.” He slid in behind her, his hands at her waist. Glancing up at the attic access hole in the ceiling she hesitated and relaxed against his body. This was suddenly becoming complicated. It wasn’t like she could take him with her.

“That wouldn’t be a good idea. Why don’t you just leave through the door and forget you ever saw me.”

“Trust me, I’ll never forget you.” He kissed a tender spot on the back of her neck and she wanted to swoon in desire.

“I need to go,” she whispered. “Alone.” She didn’t move a muscle to leave.

“Thanks again.” He turned her around in his arms and kissed her mouth. “Don’t forget what you owe me the next time we meet.” His hips, complete with the unsatisfied ridge of his arousal, ground into her pelvis.

“I won’t.” Rachel’s arms circled his waist and pressed into his body. He was absolutely irresistible. Just one more kiss. She pushed him back a step towards the bed and planted her lips on his. He didn’t resist. She might have thrown him down on the mattress for one last quickie, but the door knob across the room rattled.

* * * *

The sound of a body slamming against the door stilled the gorgeous savior in Colin’s arms. His heart wanted to burst out of his chest. He was free, yet more worried about the raging hard-on below his belt than escape.

He recognized the feminine shout and the subsequent pounding of a fist at the door sent adrenalin pumping into his system with the need to escape. Now.

“Shit. It’s Serena.” Colin peeled Rachel from him and turned her around to climb up into the hidden portal to the attic. “I’ll follow you up.”

The horrified expression on her face didn’t halt him. He put his hands on her ass and pushed.

Rachel frowned, and climbed up the rest of the way inside the attic. Colin

followed close behind lithely pulling himself through the hole. He reached down and closed the closet door slider so it wouldn't be completely obvious how they'd escaped.

He hadn't known about this secret exit. He found it interesting that the lovely mystery girl now climbing across the rafters did. His lock-pick wielding mystery girl was obviously not a prostitute like all the others sent here tonight. He wondered briefly what she'd been doing in the compound.

Colin placed the panel back in the hole as the sound of splintering wood erupted from the bedroom below. Just in the nick of time. The shrill sound of Serena's livid screams floated to the attic. Thanks to Rachel, he was miraculously free. She seemed so familiar, but his muzzled mind still recovered from being drugged and he couldn't remember where for the moment.

It would come to him. Once they parted, he'd find her again even if he had to search the ends of the earth to hunt her down.

After crawling into the attic, Colin barely had time to heave a sigh of relief before he realized he was alone. He looked over his shoulder to find Rachel carefully climbing over the studs in the ceiling towards an outer vent. Moonlight or perhaps an outdoor lamp filtered through the slats.

Colin covered the distance to the vent in seconds and exited right behind Rachel as Serena's screams faded. They were hidden from the ground by a dormer and a chimney on the third floor. It wasn't lost on him that she'd selected the perfect escape route out of the compound. *Definitely not a prostitute.*

On the ground, there was only one guard to face along the perimeter. At midnight the guard would abandon his post to get a better look at the fireworks. He'd sent this encoded information to his contact. Glancing at Rachel, he wondered how she came to have access to this same information.

They crawled to the roof over the garage area and when Rachel couldn't get the window to the apartment open, they made their way to the ground by way of a stout gutter system.

"Who are you?" Colin asked when they hit solid ground. He'd just watched her nimbly crawl over a roof and down a gutter in eveningwear and spiky high heels.

Wonder Woman wouldn't have made it without breaking her neck.

The crackle of a walkie-talkie close by silenced him. They shrank into the

shadows at the corner of the garage. Colin's back rested against the slats of the building and Rachel's lovely body pushed into him.

His hands slid down to rest on her hips as they both watched a small clearing twenty feet away where a single guard was posted between neglected buildings.

The path on the opposite side of the clearing led directly to the thick woods beyond the compound property line. This was the path Colin planned to take to get away tonight before his unexpected nap and subsequent confinement. The guard would meander away from his post to watch the fireworks once they began and the coast would be clear.

Due to his unorthodox escape from the house, he was now past the place where he would have had to traverse to flee the compound. All he had to do now was turn around and run fast in order to make his rendezvous with Zack. He wrapped his arms around his personal miracle housed in a sexy feminine body and kissed her neck. Inhaling her scent and committing it to memory, Colin was reluctant to let her go.

It had to be past midnight by now. The fireworks were late and it made him nervous. Raoul hated tardiness. They should get out now before something else happened to thwart them. He tugged on Rachel's arm to bring her along with him to safety. He'd hand her off to Zack.

Rachel resisted and pulled her arm out of his grasp. Shaking her head, she pointed in the opposite way that Colin directed. She took a step in the direction of the guard and the clearing as an explosion rocked the area. Colin felt the boom center in his chest and looked skyward to see a spectacular blaze of blue fiery rockets showering the night.

She pulled him close and put her mouth next to his ear. "I've got to get past the clearing."

Colin wrapped his arms around her and put his lips against the side of her head. "Give the guard a minute and he'll stroll away to watch the fireworks, okay?"

She nodded. Pulling away, he slid his jaw along her cheek until he met her mouth for one last kiss. He didn't care that he was late. He didn't want to leave her.

"Thank you," Colin whispered against her moist lips.

She licked his bottom lip. "You're welcome."

"Don't forget what you owe me. Next time we meet, darlin', you're all mine."

He heard her low chuckle until another boom sent their gazes up to the sky. She slipped her shoes off and they turned in time to see the guard migrate away from the clearing.

Colin squeezed her hand one last time and paused to get his bearings. He'd have to do a double time hustle if he had even a hope of making it to his rendezvous.

* * * *

Shoes now in hand, Rachel turned away from Tommy and hurried across the uneven ground. As predicted, the guard sauntered down an incline toward a space between the buildings his head tilted towards the sky to watch the next fireworks display.

She looked over her shoulder to watch Tommy depart, but he was already gone. Damn, he was good. She hadn't even heard a twig snap. Rachel mentally shook her head. She needed to focus on her own escape. She was already running behind. She tiptoed to make better time through the woods. She didn't have to go too far, but she had to get past the clearing and out of sight on the far side several yards into the woods. The thicket surrounding the clearing was too dense to walk through.

The tree she hid behind offered enough shelter until the guard was out of sight. Once he disappeared, Rachel slid around the tree and ran across the clearing. Twenty yards and she was home free.

She walked five steps into the clearing, but once she was beneath the halo of light, the walkie-talkie squawked. The subsequent sound of the hurried footsteps from the guard returning to retrieve his radio sent a pulse of fear to her heart. Her legs stopped moving as if she were suddenly mired in concrete. She remained statue still and pretended that the guard wouldn't be able to see her smack in the middle of the clearing if she didn't move a muscle.

It didn't work.

“Stop. You aren’t supposed to be out here.” The guard stated the obvious. She looked over one shoulder in time to see him slide the rifle off one shoulder and level the barrel at her back. He motioned her to turn around.

Rachel smiled as she twisted to face him and raised her hands in surrender. Damn it. She didn’t have a gun this time. The spiky heeled shoes clutched in one hand were her only weapons and currently useless. She’d lose a battle between projectile leather stilettos and high-powered rifle bullets. She could take him down once she got close enough, but not if he called for his friends to back him up.

“Come closer,” he said. He grabbed the radio and pressed the button to speak.

“Julio,” said a familiar voice from between two trees along the rim of the woods. Rachel shot a relieved gaze to Tommy standing at the edge of the clearing.

The guard released the radio call button without speaking. “Tommy? What are you doing out here?”

Tommy crossed the open space and headed towards the guard. Julio lowered his weapon but glanced back and forth between her and Tommy as if suspicious of what was going on.

“Luis said I could pick out a girl to fuck. I sent her out to meet me in the garage.” Tommy smiled. “I wanted privacy.”

“Her?” Julio gave her another quick once over as an evil little grin shaped his mouth. Rachel knew what would come next.

“Yep.” Tommy sent a salacious gaze her way and then asked, “Want me to send her to you once I’m done with her?”

Tommy motioned for her to approach. Rachel didn’t move except to tilt her head to one side in puzzlement.

Julio took a deep breath. “I don’t know—”

The sound of fireworks in the sky cut him off. He looked up to see the display and Tommy punched him in the throat. His gun went off and whizzed past Rachel’s hip. The sound was lost in the subsequent explosions of the sky’s pyrotechnics display.

Tommy pulled the gun from Julio’s shoulder and tossed it into the brush. Julio fell to the ground writhing, coughing and sputtering for only a few seconds

before silence ensued.

“Now we’re even,” Tommy said and smiled.

Rachel glanced at his crotch and replied, “Not quite.” She ran across the clearing, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him one last time. She stabbed her tongue in his mouth to duel with his a few times wishing for things that weren’t going to happen. She reached a hand down to fondle his impressive cock again. He groaned into her mouth.

Breaking the kiss she squeezed him once and said, “To hold you until we meet again. I owe you some gratification”

“Get going, darlin’. No sense in both of us being late.” He backed away with a regretful half-smile lining his features.

Rachel glanced up and down his body, noting his stiff cock, one last time to memorize it. She knew there would be hell to pay for all the ‘challenges’ from this mission, but she was alive and the information had been retrieved successfully.

When she got back to Protocol headquarters, she’d do some research to see if she could locate Tommy for a possible future lover as friends with benefits.

Chapter 4

Exactly one week after his return from Columbia, Colin sat in his supervisor's office getting his ass chewed.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Ken Davenport, Director of Domestic Operations for military intelligence, stood before him sporting an expression bordering on exasperation.

Colin shrugged. There were lots of things Ken could be angry about. Better to let him rattle off some specific information before saying anything which might unduly incriminate him during today's reprimand.

"You hacked the Witness Protection files, Colin. And you got caught. For Christ's sake what is your problem?"

"Ken—"

"No, shut up." Ken paced before him like a caged animal. "Our agency's primary directive is to strive for invisibility. Even some of our own people don't know half the shit we've done and you're blundering around every database available on a fucking personal search."

Colin did his best to look contrite, but remained silent. He wasn't too repentant. He wasn't sure whether Ken was angrier about him hacking the files or that he'd gotten caught. Probably both were equally offensive.

"I don't even want to know how you got so far into the WitSec database." Colin shifted uncomfortably in his chair like an errant schoolchild before a lecturing principal. "You crossed the line and I want it to stop."

"I'm looking for—"

"Damn it, I know who you're looking for. A ghost, that's who. You have a bug up your ass because you think an imaginary woman saved you. Well, that may be, but I'm more inclined to think you got yourself out in a drug induced blackout and have dreamed up an angel savior for God only knows what reason."

“She isn’t imaginary. She saved me from Raoul Ortega’s daughter in Colombia and—”

“Are you listening to yourself? You don’t even know whether she’s a criminal or not.”

“Let me have a glance through the WitSec files and maybe I can tell you.” *Crap, did he just say that out loud.* One glance at Ken’s flaring nostrils and open mouth said he had.

Ken clamped his lips shut and shook his head. He turned and focused his eyes out the window. “I want you gone.”

“You’re firing me?” Colin’s eyes widened.

Ken’s furious gaze turned from the window. “I should. Fortunately for you, I’ve invested too much in your training. As of this minute you are on administrative leave. I’m logging it as vacation time instead of the reprimand, which you deserve.”

“I don’t need a vacation. I’ll just—” Colin stood up to plead.

“This is not a request. It’s an order. I want you out of my sight today. Go visit your family. Go get laid. I don’t care.

“When you return, I want this ghost woman out of your system. I don’t want to hear anything except enthusiasm over the details of your next mission. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal.” The additional petulant response that had been dancing on the tip of his tongue dissolved as his boss’s growled command struck a chord in his memory.

Colin exited Ken’s office as the word ‘family’ swirled in his mind followed by the phrase ‘go get laid’. Family made him think of his cousin, Billy. Thinking of his cousin made Colin remember where he’d seen his girl before. Alabama.

He immediately booked a flight to Millbrook by way of Montgomery to visit his favorite family member and cousin, Detective Billy Hubbard. Then he’d do his best to achieve Ken’s demand that he get laid.

* * * *

“Did you call your agent off or do I need to do something more permanent?” Paul Kelly, director of the ultra secret Protocol Agency, queried his old friend Ken Davenport once he was seated in the chair across from the pristine desk Paul maintained.

Ken squinted briefly. “I took care of it.”

“Good.” Paul stood again quickly to usher him out.

Ken remained seated, not taking the hint to leave, and asked, “You want to explain to me what the big fucking deal is? The only reason you got into Columbia in the first damn place was because my deeply embedded undercover guy provided the crucial information you needed.”

Paul smoothed his tie against his shirt and sat back down wishing the art of diplomacy didn’t piss him off so much. He hated his dependency on other groups at this critical juncture. Unfortunately, he needed access to Ken and his black ops assets for the time being.

“While I’m eternally grateful for your help, the Protocol Agency is, shall we say, experimental. I won’t get permanent funding unless I’m able to complete very critical testing. My agents aren’t common knowledge even in the secretive circles where we travel, Ken. I trust you’ll keep this information very close.”

“Of course.” Ken smiled again and added, “So was your girl the one Colin claims saved his ass?”

“No comment.” Paul had been furious when he’d read the DataStream transcript from Rachel’s mission profile handler. She’d been so far out of the parameters of her mission it was a wonder she’d been successful at all. If it had been any one of the other agents, he would have removed them from the program without explanation.

Ken smiled. “Let me guess. She was supposed to ignore him in order to fulfill her Protocol mission.”

Paul inhaled and exhaled loudly. “No comment.” He longed to say, “*Yes, goddammit, she was supposed to ignore him completely.*”

“Fine. I’ll just say this.” Ken pierced him with a sincere expression. “Between us? Thank her for me. Colin is one of my best agents. I’d hate to have lost him in the eleventh hour of a two-month mission to the unexpected prurient sadism of Serena Ortega.”

Paul shook his head and glanced at the ceiling. Rachel was a good-hearted

soul and completely wrong as a participant for the Protocol Agency. She wasn't in the program because she fit the profile and he resented the position he'd been put into by his immediate supervisor to keep her at all costs.

Rachel was damned lucky she was so special.

Ken stood and extended his hand. "I'll take that as a yes."

Paul also stood and took his hand. "Like I said, no fucking comment."

* * * *

"Please be here, darlin'." Colin closed his eyes and sent up a little prayer. "I don't know where else to look for you."

He climbed out of the mid-sized rental sedan and into the humid Alabama summer evening. He slammed the door, checked his watch for the umpteenth time. Leaning a hip against the front quarter panel of the vehicle, he studied the building before him. The front door area was covered with stacked up cement circles. Artistic expression, he supposed.

This particular public library in Montgomery was almost thirty miles from his cousin's police station in Millbrook. But after a careful search of the local unpublished phone records, this was the cross referenced address assigned. His elusive mystery girl had listed it as a home phone number on the cryptic notes from his cousin's interview over two months before.

Colin felt in his bones that he was on the right track because the phone number 'Laurie Peterson' had left as the only clue to her existence wasn't public information.

He took a deep lung full of humid hot air, exhaled and headed inside to the cool air-conditioned quietness of the library.

There was no one at the front desk. He blew out another deep breath and stifled his disappointment that his dream girl wasn't parked by the phone pinning for him to call. He searched the front lobby for a library employee to inquire about a beautiful prim blonde who might work here.

He carried with him an official 'FBI' badge that he could flash to subvert nosy questions should the need occur. No one needed to know he wanted to speak to her for purely sexual reasons.

Colin searched the rows of shelves on his immediate right for any sign of life, but saw no one. Across the naturally quiet space of the library, he suddenly heard a loud squeak as if from a metal wheel in desperate need of oil. He turned toward the direction of the noise in search of a live person to question.

Passing several more rows of shelves, he was rewarded by the abrupt vision of his mystery girl, Rachel, shelving books as if merely biding her time.

After all the fruitless searching he'd done over the past couple of weeks, Colin wanted to shout with glee. He restrained himself since it was a library. Intelligent words dried up in his mouth, he was so stunned to find her. The vocal affliction was due in part to the fact that the majority of his blood fled south out of his brain at the first glance of her lovely body.

Settling a shoulder against the nearest shelf of books, he forced himself to calm down. He watched her work until his mind and verbal skills reconnected.

Flashes of various sexual positions lit up his imagination and didn't help his blood flow. It did, however, give him an excellent list of possibilities in preparation for what tonight's motel room experience would entail. *If* he could talk her into it, which shouldn't be too difficult. She knew what he was capable of. He mentally smacked his lips in memory.

Rachel was dressed very conservatively compared to the sexy blue evening gown and fuck-me heels she'd been wearing in Columbia. Instead of a French twist, her hair shaped into an unflattering bun at the nape of her lovely neck, but it was definitely his dream girl. Even from ten feet away he could smell her unique fragrance amidst the dust and old paper scents floating in the musty air of the library.

Colin watched her put books on the shelf methodically for several seconds before an intelligent thought occurred to him. Time to break the ice, so to speak.

He cleared his throat and in a raised voice asked, "Could you recommend a good book for me to read, darlin'?"

She shrieked, twisted toward his voice and promptly dropped the volume she was about to put on the shelf. Her hand went to her chest and her cheeks flushed a most lovely shade of crimson. She took a step backwards and bumped into the book cart with enough force to make the squeaky wheel protest. Her frightened gaze found his face. She opened her mouth but no sound came out.

"Sorry." Colin grinned. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Her hand dropped from her chest and her beautiful lush mouth closed, but she remained silent. She swallowed hard and her focus slid to his lips momentarily. Seconds later she lifted her gaze to his eyes and stared as if entranced.

“So how ‘bout it?”

Her eyes narrowed. “How about what?”

Colin crossed his arms. “Any books you could recommend for me? Or perhaps we could think of something else to do.”

“I’m sorry.” Her wary-eyed look scanned his upper body. “I don’t know you well enough to recommend a book...or anything else to do.”

Colin smacked a hand to his chest in mock wounded despair. “I’m crushed.”

“Why?” Her eyes narrowed again this time in puzzlement.

He gave her a chin check and a single nod. “You know why.”

“I do?” Her gaze swept from his face to his feet and back up again. Her eyes widened slightly and a blush tinted her cheeks as if her memory had just returned.

“I helped you escape. Remember?”

She averted her eyes and he knew she recalled their previous encounter. Colin wondered why she wasn’t a little more eager to see him. He was certainly excited. The ridge forming in his jeans was proof of that. Had her visual body scan discovered his ultimate intentions? Was she now as energized as he was?

She swallowed hard. “How did you find me?”

“The phone number you left at the Millbrook police station traced to this building.” He shrugged. The process hadn’t really been as easy as that. Gaining the elusive information took repeated promises and threats of violence to force his cousin, Billy, to cough up the number. The unpublished number was used only in emergencies when the Montgomery public library building reverted to use as a city shelter during inclement weather.

She closed her eyes. “What are you going to do to me?”

“Wicked things.” He grinned again.

Her eyes popped open. “What?”

“You owe me. I kept you from getting caught.”

She crossed her arms as if her limbs were a solid enough barrier between them, arched one eyebrow and asked, “What do you want?”

Colin closed the short distance between them easing close enough to bump his torso against her folded arms. She was effectively trapped against the book cart. Her breathing increased noticeably but she didn’t try to get away. He had her exactly where he wanted her.

He lowered his face as close as he could without any skin touching and whispered, “For starters, I want another taste.”

* * * *

A thrill of anticipation drilled through Laurie’s body when his muscular chest trapped her crossed arms. He was close enough to kiss her.

The second he’d appeared at the end of the row she thought she might be dreaming again. There hadn’t been a single day in the past two months that she hadn’t thought about that kiss. She regretted her hasty exit from the police station. She hadn’t wanted Detective Hubbard to catch her though.

Two weeks ago she’d had another dream. A very sexy dream. The gorgeous man currently occupying her personal space had garnered a starring role. She’d been toying with the idea of returning to Millbrook to drive by the police station on the off chance she’d see him again. Foolish junior high school memories of chasing boys kept her from embarrassing herself.

Towering over her this minute, she realized he was right. He’d helped her get away. And more than that, he’d kissed her, inspiring repeated wet dreams like no man in her past ever had. She did owe him.

Now he wanted another taste? So did she. An involuntary shudder ran through her again. She’d been having sexy dreams about him since that day. Up until recently they’d involved fairly tame kissing, hugging and touching. She always woke before anything ‘good’ happened, although she’d longed for more.

Laurie got her wish after another blackout a couple of weeks ago had sent her dreams into the erotic zone. She’d had a flash vision of this man’s head beneath her dress doing scandalous things with his tongue.

The very thought of that salacious dream made her core gush in anticipation. With him here in the flesh, she fairly throbbed with unquenched desire. He was the first man to make her so sexually aware.

She found her voice. "How...how much trouble am I really in?" The quiver in her tone forced her to take another breath as she tried her best to calm down.

There was still the matter of her foolish confession to the other detective. Perhaps they'd discovered new evidence. What if she'd killed that man from her first blackout and it wasn't simply a nightmare?

Just when she had convinced herself it was all a stress-induced anxiety dream, Mr. Gorgeous appeared like an apparition to...to...what was he going to do? Wicked things involving tasting her again? He crowded her personal space. She found she didn't mind. If any other man had been this close, well, she didn't ever allow any other men such liberties.

"Oh, darlin', you're in a world of trouble." His hands lifted to rest on either side of narrow space they shared trapping her. Not that she wanted to escape. A thread of rational fear crept into her mind. How did she know this man was even from the police station? Just because he knew someone there didn't make him an authorized officer of the law.

"I want to see your identification." She didn't know where the question had come from or the nerve to ask, but she decided it was a good idea.

He stopped crowding her. "What?"

Laurie raised her chin. "You heard me." Fortified by her newly found courage, she demanded more. "I want to see your badge." Her request seemed to throw him off balance, but only for a second. Not even long enough to calm the heartbeats pounding a steady rhythm in her chest.

Without taking his eyes off of hers he reached into his back jeans pocket and pulled out a black bi-fold wallet. He flipped it open to reveal a badge. She sucked in a surprised breath.

FBI.

Oh Lord, she was in more trouble than she'd thought if it was now a federal offense.

She skimmed over it quickly before he snapped it shut and pocketed it again. At least she could finally put a name to the man in her dreams. Colin Riley,

FBI agent.

“Are you going to arrest me?”

“Nope.”

“What then?”

His easy grin relaxed her. “Let’s start with a kiss and see what happens.”

At the mere mention of the word kiss, Laurie’s eyes went to his beautiful mouth. She wanted to kiss him.

He lowered his mouth to hers and paused a breath away from touching her. He didn’t connect. She waited as anticipation curled along her nerve endings. He exhaled and the warm air from his minty breath danced across her sensitive lips, but he didn’t move quite close enough to touch her.

Impatience guiding her, Laurie boldly closed the short distance and pushed her lips firmly against his. Electric sensation buzzed across her face outward from the sudden union of their mouths.

Her bold kiss was a catalyst for his further action. Wrapping his arms around her willing, and now very languid frame, he pulled her tight against his muscular body. She moaned in utter pleasure unable to think beyond the pulsating sensation of the intimate contact with a delectable man. His lips shifted and softened. The kiss deepened as his tongue slipped inside her mouth and sent a battery of shivers along her spine. His mouth brushed leisurely and thoroughly over her lips as his tongue explored every surface of her mouth.

Was she dreaming this time? She hoped not. Laurie slid her arms around his neck and pushed her breasts complete with ultra sensitive nipples into his brawny chest. He groaned and the sound of his voice sent another gush flooding between her legs.

His hips ground rhythmically into hers. The firm ridge of his erection pressed against her lower half now weeping in readiness. His hands trailed a circular finger massage down her back and stopped at the base of her spine for only a few seconds. Fingertips slipped even lower until he cupped her butt and squeezed her cheeks.

The lower half of Laurie’s body fairly pulsed with the need to connect physically. Her hips pushed forward of their own volition against his stiff shaft.

He broke their kiss and trailed his mouth to her ear. “I’m so glad I finally

found you.”

She was too.

His hips nudged forward to meet her gentle thrust. “Where can we meet?”

“Meet?” With their bodies intimately entwined and pushing into each other, she enjoyed this meeting just fine.

“Why don’t we go to your place.” He ran his fingers along the curve of her jaw. “We can catch up on old times.”

Laurie stiffened. A bucket of ice water wouldn’t have chilled her as much as his words. “We can’t go to my house.” The disapproving face of her aunt swam across her brain. Aunt Fiona didn’t like the idea of Laurie dating at all, let alone what she had in mind.

“Let’s get a motel room then. There’s one across the street.”

She backed away from him, but slammed into the book cart she’d forgotten was there. “What if someone were to see us? I can’t be seen entering or leaving a motel room across from where I work. People would talk.”

He glanced around their immediate area and then focused his sexy gaze on her face. “Any quiet places here in the library? Maybe once you close up—”

“Oh no.” She cut him off and grabbed for her watch. “I’m late.” Laurie edged past him straightening her clothing. “Stay right here. Don’t move.”

She ignored his puzzled scowl and scrambled to the front door. Ten minutes past closing time and she hadn’t locked up yet. If the sheriff stopped by, she didn’t finish the thought. She didn’t have to.

“Laurie! Where are you?” Royce Kingston, the nightshift sheriff’s deputy, bellowed.

“I’m right here, Royce.” Laurie skidded around the corner to enter the lobby. Hand resting on his pistol, Royce’s perfected stance suggested he’d kick ass first and ask questions later. He was a fine officer, attractive in a pretty way and ever on the prowl to get her to go out with him. He was also the last person she wanted to deal with right now.

The ready smile came next and it wouldn’t be long before she’d be coming up with yet another excuse to put him off.

Her Aunt Fiona forbade her to encourage Royce. She told her repeatedly that getting serious about a law officer would only lead to heartache. Colin being

an FBI agent would probably send her over the edge. She'd have to keep her FBI agent a very close secret. Especially right now.

"The door's unlocked, Laurie. Are you sure you're okay in here?" He glanced around the front lobby with light suspicion creasing his expression as if he sensed something was amiss. The only thing out of place was the FBI agent waiting secretly in the stacks.

"I'm fine. I was shelving the last cart of books and I just lost track of the time. I'm sorry." She pasted a smile on her face but regretted it immediately. She didn't want to encourage him. Even the slightest smile always seemed to hearten him and bolster his confidence that she'd finally accept a date.

The truth regarding her feelings for Royce were complicated. She'd never been attracted to him but didn't want to hurt his feelings by telling him straight up. She'd always thought of him like a brother, but she didn't have the heart to say it. So he kept asking and she kept putting him off.

He studied her face at length. After a few seconds he relaxed and moved his hand off his weapon. "You look a little flushed. Are you feeling all right?" *Crap. She was flushed?* Colin's wicked smile centered in her brain and she couldn't focus on an explanation fast enough.

"Once I realized the...um...late time...I...um...I ran over here as fast as I could." Laurie forced a shrug, pasted another weak smile on her face and willed him to leave quickly. Her lips felt swollen and the realization sent a flash of heat spreading across her face. She hoped her face wasn't tomato red.

Laurie took a deep breath to calm herself but caught a whiff of Colin's scent instead. His spicy fragrance clung to her and caused anxiety not tranquility. She wondered if Royce could smell it. One look at his face and she knew he didn't.

Royce's face softened and a tolerant smile appeared. "Go ahead and lock up. I'll wait and drive you home."

"No." Laurie answered too fast. "You don't have to do that. You know my aunt doesn't approve."

He eased closer and sighed. "Aren't you old enough to make your own decisions?"

Laurie didn't want to have this same argument, especially not if Colin could hear. She sent up a mental prayer that he stayed put. Royce might never

leave if he showed himself.

“Laurie? Are you almost done?” Colin’s inquisitive voice came from over her shoulder. She closed her eyes and amended her prayer to one for strength.

Colin strolled into the front lobby and slung one arm casually, yet possessively, around her shoulders. Royce stiffened as if someone had plugged him into a light socket.

“Who are you?” Royce’s hand went to his weapon again.

Colin immediately flipped his badge open and held it up for Royce to read. He must have already had it in his hand to whip it out so fast. She sighed, wondering if they’d whip out their penises next and start marking their territory.

Royce’s shocked gaze slid from Colin’s badge to Laurie’s face and back again. “FBI, huh?”

“That’s right.” Colin squeezed her shoulder. There was an awkward silence for several more seconds.

Royce backed down first by relaxing his posture and dropping his hand away from his holster. “I’ll let you close up then.” His eyes cut to Colin briefly before his gaze dipped to the floor.

“Royce, please don’t say anything to my—”

“I won’t.” His curt tone cutting off her plea told her he was hurt. She hadn’t meant to crush him. He’d made it clear from the second they’d met three years ago he was interested in a relationship. She unfortunately didn’t feel a spark with Royce. Never had. While her aunt truly didn’t want her involved with an officer of law enforcement, it was also a handy excuse to keep him at bay.

Colin on the other hand made her blush, stammer and get wet by merely coming into her proximity. The memory of his kiss sent another wave of heat creeping over her cheeks. She dropped her gaze to the floor.

“Don’t forget to lock up.” Royce did a crisp about-face and exited the library without looking back. Laurie was half relieved and half unnerved by his sudden departure. Colin squeezed her shoulder again, turned her to face him and kissed her quickly on the mouth.

“That wasn’t your old boyfriend, was it?” Colin brushed her cheek with his fingertips, his expression pensive.

“No. Royce is only a friend. He’s practically like a brother to me.”

Colin laughed. "Oh yeah? He has more than brotherly affection for you, darlin'."

She shrugged. "Unfortunately, I don't share any feelings beyond friendship."

"Good." His hand slipped around to cup the back of her head. She thought he was going to kiss her again, but he asked, "Will you come to my motel in Millbrook tonight?"

Laurie nodded without hesitation. "Where are you staying?"

"The Southern Inn. It's the new one across the street from the old movie theater showing the Cary Grant movie festival."

She nodded as a thrill zipped down her back. "I know it."

"Great. I'm in room 143. Ground floor, back side of the motel, well away from the street. I promise no one will see you."

Laurie nodded again as another pleasure-ridden sensation dashed across her body and landed in her pulsing core. "All right. I'll be there in an hour."

Chapter 5

Colin half expected Rachel to stand him up. She'd been so skittish and worried about anyone finding out they were together earlier it made him curious to find out what case she was working on in a public library that could inspire such fear.

Jesus, he hadn't been that nervous even after spending two anxiety-ridden months at Raoul Ortega's compound in Columbia.

The twin headlights from a small vehicle turned down the quiet road behind the motel and headed towards the end of the row and his assigned room. An arc of light from the headlight's beam briefly lit up the window. He squinted and continued his searching gaze as a nondescript import compact parked next to his rental sedan.

She'd come after all. He grinned, dropped the curtain and opened the door to welcome her to his humble temporary abode. The rush of evening humidity slammed into him along with the scent of diesel fuel on the wind from the highway over the hill.

Apprehension would be understating Rachel's expression as she alighted from her Honda Civic and pushed the door shut with one hip. She darted around the hood, leapt over the curb and rushed towards him as if an evil entity dogged her heels.

Colin caught her to his chest when she launched into his arms. He pulled her close and shut the cheap wooden door as soon as they cleared the metal threshold.

"Glad you made it," he whispered and pushed her against the adjacent wall. Her arms slid around his neck. She brushed her cheek along his as her lips connected with his jaw in several light kisses.

"Me too," she murmured. Her whisper caressed his face.

Anxious to take his first taste of her in the privacy of his motel room, he secured his body against her lush frame and crushed his lips over hers. She moaned as he breached her mouth licking his way to the warmth inside. His cock thickened and happily rested against her belly, waiting impatiently for an opportunity to experience what they'd missed in South America.

Colin snagged the bottom of her skirt and slid his hand along her silky thigh. She wore panties this time and he smiled at the memory of her sexy lack of undergarments in Columbia.

* * * *

A rush of illicit anticipation at what Colin was about to do under her skirt sent a shiver down her spine. The brush of cool air hit her thighs when he pulled the hem to her waist.

Before she could protest, not that she wanted to, his hand slid between her legs niggling beneath her panties. His fingers found and probed her most intimate folds. The entire lower half of her body was on fire from his touch.

Warning bells rang out in one part of her brain, but not the part that was currently in control. She wanted his touch. She wanted him to stroke her. She wanted to have sex. With him.

Laurie twisted her mouth over his eager lips and wriggled her tongue through to duel with his. He didn't stop her.

A needy noise erupted from her throat when his fingers grazed her clit. Her hips twitched with longing trying to aid his fingers. He inserted two of them inside her and she almost released from the unexpected invasion.

He stroked his fingers in and out of her body finding and rubbing her clitoris once more. She whimpered. His tongue stroked inside her mouth set to the same rhythm as his fingers stroked her clit. She was fast coming to an unexpected peak.

Laurie was awash with sensation. From the vigorous assault on her mouth to her tingling nipples to the spine melting feeling of a man's fingers stroking her with intimate knowledge as if he had read her mind. The orgasm took her by surprise, bursting across her lower body in an explosion she couldn't contain. Her breathing went out of control.

The sensitive nub of her clit was afire. His hand slid away from the ache of release only to delve deeply inside her body as her core clenched repeatedly around his fingertips.

He broke the kiss. "Let's pick up where we left off in Columbia. Is that good for you?" The urgency of his tone over ruled her sluggish response to his question.

"Columbia? What—" she managed. He cut off her stunned question with his delectable mouth pressing to hers tenderly for yet another kiss. As before, he licked her bottom lip and her mouth parted eagerly to accept his warm wonderfully sinful invasion.

The arm not buried between her legs slid around her waist pulling her tighter into his body. The ridge of his arousal pressed against her. The mere thought of sex with him made a gush of moisture coat her core and consequently his fingers. He pulled his face away breaking the luscious connection.

"I missed you, Rachel," he whispered. "I didn't think I'd ever find you again."

The mention of another woman's name rippled across her awareness like the icy douse of an unstoppable avalanche.

Rachel?

"What did you call me?" Laurie pushed his arms away. His hand slipped away from between her legs. He backed up half a step and the warmth of embarrassment replaced his body heat. His expression wreathed in obvious confusion at her abrupt push.

"Sorry?" His eyes narrowed and zeroed in on her Montgomery Public Library name tag still pinned to her blouse. "What do you want me to call you? You told me your name was Rachel." He eased into her personal space again and looked at her chest focusing on her name tag.

Lifting his head, he glanced around the motel room as if searching for an audience and whispered, "I'd be happy to call you Laurie if that's your current cover."

Laurie nervously took a quick look all around the small room wondering what *he* was looking for. "I never told you my name was Rachel. I never told you my name at all."

"Perhaps you were distracted when you told me." The grin shaping his

mouth was infectious. Perhaps she *had* been a little distracted, but she knew her own name. And it wasn't Rachel.

"I ran into you. I tripped over you. You saved me from taking a header down the stairs. You kissed me and then allowed me to escape from the police station."

"I know, but..." He scrunched his eyebrows in puzzlement and whispered, "Aren't you allowed to discuss Columbia?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I've never been out of the state of Alabama."

His laugh startled her. "Whatever you say, darlin'." He leaned down and brushed her ear with his seductive warm lips. "No one's in here. It's just you and me."

She looked around nervously. "I should hope so."

Colin relaxed against her and asked, "What's really troubling you?"

She sighed. "Lots of things, but mostly I'm not in the habit of meeting strange men in motels."

Colin's gaze pierced her. Gripping her shoulders, he pulled away and grinned down at her. "I'm glad. Me either."

Unnerved by the idea he thought she was someone else, she wanted to change the subject. Part of the reason she was here was to assure herself she wasn't in trouble for what she'd reported to Detective Hubbard in Millbrook. If she were honest with herself she'd admit that the primary reason she was here had nothing to do with being in trouble. She yearned for intimate companionship. Sex. With Colin. He was the first man in forever to have such a profound impact on her rioting libido.

First, find out if he's going to arrest you, said a stern voice in her mind. The voice of reason, Laurie supposed.

"Perhaps you should tell me what I'm required to do to garner your continued silence of my whereabouts."

"Your whereabouts?" He squinted. "What continued silence?"

"You helped me escape from the police station after I revealed something embarrassing to a homicide detective. Now you're here to make me pay up for that unwise confession. Aren't you?"

His expression registered complete confusion. "I'm not here for reimbursement. Well, not exactly." His lips hinted at a smile.

"Then what are you here for?"

Colin took a step back. "I thought you and I had a connection. One I wanted to pursue, but only if you're interested, darlin'." He took another step away from her and suddenly they weren't touching anymore. His warmth abandoned her as well. "There is no threat involved. What kind of guy do you think I am?" He backed away further and collapsed to sit on the edge of the bed with a sigh. He lifted his head and glanced up and sent her a sharp unhappy appraisal.

"I don't have any idea what kind of man you are. We're strangers." Laurie shrugged wondering why he was angry.

His gaze focused in on her body. He stared at her skirt and huffed once. "Not complete strangers."

Her core clenched in memory of his clever fingers recently satisfying the lower half of her body. What was she doing here if not for carnal pleasures? She'd come here expressly for intimate contact. And most importantly, sex. She wasn't leaving without experiencing at least one physical act regardless of what he mistakenly thought her name was. He was very attractive but it wasn't like he was here to sweep her off her feet and take her away to his castle in the sky. Laurie didn't believe in happily ever after. Never had.

She softened and prepared to make nice. "I don't want to fight with you." *I want you to make love to me.*

The mere thought of imminent sex took her breath away. Her chest tightened in panic that he might turn her down. Send her away.

"That makes two of us." He rested his elbows on his knees and let his hands dangle. "You understand I'm not going to force you to do anything, right?"

She nodded and tried to get her lungs to cooperate.

His smile became sardonic. "Good. The sexual 'ball' is officially in your court."

"I don't understand."

"Whatever you're here for, take it. I won't stop you, but I'm done making advances." He folded his hands behind his head, leaned back on the bed watching

her and said, “Your turn.”

Laurie approached him wondering what constituted ‘her turn’. She wasn’t experienced in this kind of endeavor and she sensed he was peeved at her for some reason.

“What should I do?”

“Whatever you want.”

“I don’t know enough to know what I want. The truth is...I’m very shy and inexperienced.”

He grunted. “I don’t believe you.”

“Why?”

He grinned and his gaze shifted to the space below her skirt line where her core still pulsed. “I remember tasting you. You weren’t shy back then.”

She had no earthly idea what he was talking about unless he referred to the kiss on the stairwell, or perhaps he’d visited her recent dreams. “Well, I’m shy now.”

Colin’s clever hands shifted from behind his head. He raised his torso up on bent elbows leaving his legs spread open. She noticed the wide ridge of his cock straining his jeans. His gaze never left her face. “Come here,” his husky voice demanded.

Laurie strolled to the bed positioning herself between his legs which dangled off the edge. Her gaze strayed to the massive erection tenting his fly. She wanted to touch him.

“Go ahead. Touch it.” He *could* read her mind disturbingly enough.

A flash of heat blasted her cheeks as she reached a hand down to stroke his shaft through the fabric. The hard ridge felt like a steel bar lodged in his jeans. She fairly vibrated with the desire to pull his pants off and impale herself on his cock.

“Unzip me.”

Laurie stopped a rush air from escaping in surprise. She swallowed hard and leaned slightly to unfasten the button. It popped open as if by magic. She grasped the small metal rectangle and the ripping sound of the zipper opening sent a gush of fresh wetness between her legs.

His cock sprang forth hindered only by the navy boxers. With trembling fingers she boldly stroked him through the thin cotton fabric. A guttural noise erupted from his throat when she then grasped his cock in a loose fisted hand and squeezed.

“You’re playing with fire, darlin’.”

The power of his reaction to her touch was a heady feeling. She squeezed his length once more and stroked her fingers down his wide shaft, eliciting a hiss of appreciation from his lips. A pulse of needful desire throb a rhythm in her core.

“Tell me what to do to get a blaze going,” she whispered. She was about to self-combust.

“Undress for me,” his hoarse whisper commanded. “Slowly.”

Laurie took a deep breath and moved her hand from his bobbing cock to the buttons of her blouse. One by one she released each fastener through its respective hole until the lace of her bra was revealed. She shrugged her shoulders. The silky gray garment slid down her back to puddle at her heels. She undid the button and zipper of her skirt and slid the fabric down her legs. She kicked her shoes off, glad that the warm temperature had allowed her to leave her legs bare this morning.

Colin pushed up from his reclining position his face aligning with her chest. “Pull the straps of your bra down. I want to taste your nipples.”

Laurie shivered. Her arms crossed, fingers dipping beneath the elastic at her shoulders to do what he asked. Revealing her breasts to him was the single most erotic thing she’d ever done, unless she counted touching his cock moments ago because he told her to do so.

Colin’s hands slid from her bare thighs to her waist. He pulled one aching breast to his waiting mouth. The warm suction from his lips and tongue on her nipple made her legs so weak they almost buckled. If he noticed her wobble, he ignored it in favor of releasing the first nipple only to latch his mouth onto her other breast.

He toyed with the edge of lacy elastic on her panties. Hooking his fingers beneath the top edge, he pulled them down her legs until the fabric pooled at her feet with the rest of her discarded clothing. The suction he exerted on her nipples released only long enough to complete his task. He kissed a path to her navel and back to her breasts.

His fingertips skimming the inside of her thighs should have prepared her, but she jumped when his hand unerringly found her wet slit. She was distracted by the erotic pull of his lips against her nipples. He slipped two fingers deeply inside her and rubbed her aching clitoris with his thumb. The sensations overwhelmed her body.

Laurie slid her hands into his hair and pulled his head forward. For several pulse pounding moments, he stroked her clit and alternately sucked her nipples until she was ready to scream.

Panting harshly and pressed up against the rabid edge of another roaring climax, she couldn't catch her breath. She shrieked in frustration when he abruptly released her and stood up breaking the intimate contact.

She stumbled backwards a step trying to control her harsh panting. "Why did you stop?"

He grinned. "I've got too many clothes on."

Laurie released a deep sigh and grabbed his shirt to help pull it over his head. He kicked his shoes off and she watched transfixed as he slowly removed his jeans. His magnificent shaft caught her attention. She knew it was rude to stare, but she couldn't look at anything else.

He laughed. "See anything you like?"

"Yes."

"Still shy?"

She swallowed hard. "Yes."

"Name the position you want to try first."

She glanced at the bed and back into his eyes. "I want...you on top of me," her hoarse whisper sounded like the definition of desperation.

Colin smiled. "Come here." When she didn't move, he reached out and pulled her against his chest. She'd never been completely naked with a man before. Her sexual experience was extremely limited and relegated to a single hurried high school experience along with a couple of half clothed back seat episodes during college. They were very distant memories and nothing like the power of emotion she experienced in this moment.

Laurie didn't know what to do with her hands so they remained loose at her sides. Colin buried his face against her neck. His lips grazing the sensitive

place below her ear as he hugged her tight. The hard length of his arousal pressed into her belly. He massaged her back and at the sudden release of the elastic squeezing beneath her breasts, her bra loosened and fell to the floor.

“You’re beautiful.” His whispered words caressing the tender skin along her jaw relaxed her. “Get on the bed. I’ll get a condom.”

Condom? She’d forgotten. How foolish.

Laurie pulled the sheets back and crawled on the bed twisting to stretch out on her back. She watched mesmerized as he secured the condom. He didn’t hesitate quickly climbing on the bed positioning himself over her in seconds.

“Spread your legs, darlin’.”

Her eyes slid half shut, anticipating the imminent pleasure, as she widened her legs. She was about to have sex with the man she’d been dreaming about for months.

“I’ve wanted you for so long.” She closed her eyes and whispered, “Take me.”

* * * *

Colin was so turned on it was a wonder he hadn’t climaxed putting the damn condom on. Rachel, no, he meant Laurie. She insisted on being called Laurie, which was so fucking intriguing accompanied with the whole innocent act, his cock throbbed in anticipation. With her stupendous performance, she took the art of undercover persona to an entirely new level.

Her innocently whispered plea, “Take me,” made him want to slide his cock to the hilt and fuck her until she came screaming his name. He knew she was drenched since his fingers were coated in her wetness from stroking her to release.

Colin inhaled deeply to calm his ardor but the musky fragrance hanging in the air did nothing to slow his libido. He leaned down and kissed her mouth lowering his body to cover hers. His cock aligned perfectly and nestled between her legs. Grabbing himself he inserted the head of his penis inside her warmth. Slippery and tight, her pussy clenched him like an oiled fist.

He broke the kiss. “Look at me.”

Laurie’s eyes popped open.

“Can you feel me?” He thrust forward an inch as he spoke.

Her eyes widened and she nodded slowly.

“Tell me you want me.”

“I want you. All of you.”

Colin drove his cock deep, sheathing himself to the hilt watching her face as he pierced her. The pleasure registering in her half closed eyes made the long wait all worthwhile.

God, she was beautiful.

Sliding a hand between them, he found and stroked her clit as he pushed in and pulled out. In and out. After only a few strokes she arched her back and met him thrust for thrust. Her fingers gripped his shoulders, nails digging into his sweat glistened skin.

He was fast approaching a ball-tightening climax. The closer he got to the edge of release, the faster he pumped. Her breathing increased to panting. Eyes closed, she threw her head back against the pillow. Sounds of the seductive moans escaping her throat sent a vibrant pulse down his body, which curled around the base of his cock.

Laurie screamed as she climaxed. Her internal muscles rippled clenching his dick and sent him blissfully over the edge of orgasmic release as he pumped the last several strokes deeply.

The sensitive flesh of his cock trembled from exquisite torture after he came. Slumping over her, Colin kissed her neck resisting the urge to nip at her skin. Something about a powerful, long-awaited orgasm made him want to bite into flesh. Animal instincts, he guessed.

She slid her arms around his neck and kissed a path along his jaw until she reached his chin.

“That was amazing,” her murmur lost in the kiss she pressed to his mouth.

Colin sighed deeply and nodded unable to generate enough energy for a reply. He was spent. Balanced on his elbows to keep from crushing her, he wanted to slide down, cover her body and take a nap.

The last time he’d come this close to a sexual encounter was with Rachel in Columbia. The memory of her pussy poised over his mouth milliseconds before he’d clamped on to take the first taste slid into his mind and made him smile.

“How did that compare?”

“Compare?”

“To Columbia?” He licked her throat tasting salt.

She remained silent for so long he lifted his head to see if she was awake.

“Why do you insist I was in Columbia? I assure you, I wasn’t.”

“Do I need to sweep for bugs? No one is listening to us. I promise you.”

A panicked expression colored her cheeks. “I should hope not.” She glanced at the door and windows as if uncertain.

“I won’t tell.” Colin knew he was being unreasonable.

The very first rule of undercover work was don’t trust anyone. Especially don’t trust anyone that’s not in your chain of command. He didn’t know why it was so important to get Rachel, or Laurie, to admit her covert role. Anytime he was undercover and someone questioned his identity, he prepared to die before revealing anything. He slid his cock from her and rolled onto his back.

“You have obviously confused me with some other girl.” She turned away to face the door and curled in a ball.

He was being an ass. She shouldn’t be expected to reveal her undercover identity to appease him. Especially not in bed, especially not since he’d just had the best sex of his life in the missionary position with a woman who intrigued him as no other woman ever had.

He certainly hadn’t been a boy scout in the bedroom during his life. He didn’t lack for female company when he wanted it. And he hadn’t wanted anyone but her since he’d caught her on those stairs before he’d left on his last mission.

Colin turned his face toward the back of her head. She sniffed. Shit. Was she crying?

He rolled over and snuggled up behind her. “I’ve got the right girl. I’m sorry for what I said.”

She sniffed again. “Okay.” She rolled to her back. He cupped her jaw and kissed her mouth. Running his hand down to her breast, his cock throbbed and he realized he needed to take a trip to the bathroom.

He stopped kissing her. “I’ll be right back. Don’t move.”

Colin slid off the bed and went to dispose of the condom. He was half

afraid she'd be gone by the time he returned. He cleaned himself up as quickly as possible and popped the bathroom door open expecting an empty room. She was seated on the edge of the bed looking at the door. The sheet from the bed was wrapped securely around her middle showcasing her lovely shoulders.

"Do you want something to drink? I have a bottle of excellent scotch whiskey with me." Colin strolled nude to the small table in the corner of the motel room and poured himself a short glass.

"No, thank you. I don't drink." She glanced up at him and then her gaze slid to his cock, which was getting hard again. Her cheeks flamed red. She looked away quickly. Regretfully.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not used to seeing naked men prancing about." Her voice was barely audible over the air-conditioning unit pumping out a chilly breeze with a steady hum.

"Me either." He chanced a look and saw a half smile. "And for the record, I'm not prancing. I'm pacing around the room in a very manly way."

She laughed. "Yes. I'm sorry. You're very manly."

Colin strolled over and seated himself on the bed crowding her until he connected their bodies along one side. His cock reared to full attention ready for more action as he took a sip of whiskey. From the corner of his eye he saw her glance at his erection and look away as if embarrassed. Still playing the prim innocent. God, she was good. He could take lessons.

"What happens now?" Her barely audible question sent several scandalous thoughts of all the licentious things they could do next.

He lowered the glass to his thigh and rested his chin on her shoulder. "Whatever you want." He kissed her cheek.

"We already did what I wanted. What do *you* want?"

"I want more."

"More? But you already—" She stopped abruptly when he shoved his half empty glass in her hand.

"Hold this and I'll show you exactly what I want." He slid to the floor on his knees twisting to squat in front of her. The white sheet draped across her legs revealed one knee and hid the other. She held a corner of fabric loosely tucked

under one arm to cover her breasts. Placing his hands on her knees, he slid his fingertips along both of her inner thighs until he reached her moistened and utterly delectable pussy.

“Wait.” She clutched the sheet to her breast and wobbled the glass, sloshing the whiskey up to the rim, almost spilling it.

“No. I’ve got to have a taste of you.” He pushed the sheet up revealing the trimmed thatch of her mound and lowered his head between her thighs. “I’ve dreamed about this.”

Colin pulled her lower lips open gently and clamped his lips onto her clit, licking at the creamy moisture gathered there. Her legs closed in on his head.

Laurie whimpered at first and shrieked when he sucked on her clit again. Moments later, her thighs relaxed and her fingertips brushed the back of his head. Colin took it as encouragement and licked her. He slid two fingers inside her drenched pussy relishing the tangy flavor of aroused woman swirled together with the residual whiskey on his tongue. His cock throbbed once, wanting to enter to the hilt as he played.

The sound of his beeper going off split the air a half a second before Laurie arched her back and screamed in release. He loved that she was a screamer. He pumped his fingers in and out of her body as her orgasm convulsed and patently ignored his beeper.

After four rings his beeper stopped only briefly before it started up again. He should have turned it off. Colin released her clit, kissed Laurie’s inner thigh once and leaned over to retrieve his beeper from the nightstand.

The message was from Ken to report back for an urgent assignment. *What the hell?*

Chapter 6

Laurie trembled as she recovered from the live reenactment of the erotic dream she'd had a couple of weeks ago. Her sexy FBI agent, Colin, had starred in both performances. In this version, he'd parted the sheet to dip his head between her legs and then *he'd licked her*. Even in the privacy of her own mind, she whispered the words. Wicked, wonderful pleasure pounded through her veins as her core pulsed in the aftermath of pleasure.

Slumped on the bed utterly exhausted, Laurie clutched his glass of whiskey in her hand. She didn't know how she could sit upright let alone keep his drink from spilling everywhere.

Her gaze traveled to Colin kneeling next to the bed. He was still naked. His huge erection rested against the nightstand as he checked his beeper. It beeped again for a third time in his hand.

"Who is it?"

"Nobody important." He clicked a button and the annoying noise stopped in mid beep. He dropped the device next to the lamp, grabbed his glass and took a sip. "Now, where were we?"

A cell phone started playing a tune she didn't recognize from beneath the clothing strewn next to the bed.

"What the fuck?" Colin grunted under his breath. He pushed the glass back into her hand and crawled over to his pants to dig for the phone.

When he found it, he snapped it open and snarled, "What?" into the receiver.

Laurie couldn't hear the other person, but she watched his face change from one of supreme anger to one of disbelief. His eyes widened. He grunted once and ran a hand through his hair brushing a couple of errant strands off his forehead. "Tonight?" he asked and then paused.

Glancing over at her once quickly, he sighed deeply and turned his attention to the phone call. Through gritted teeth he said in a low tone, "I'm where you told me to go."

Laurie looked down into the amber contents of the glass she held and pondered his phone call. It sounded like he was being called away. She wondered if this was a planned call. Perhaps he'd engaged one of his friends in advance to set up a call and interrupt them so he wouldn't have to stay and explain why he didn't want to see her again.

She supposed he would never come back. Why would he? He'd gotten exactly what he wanted, right? But then again, Laurie had certainly gotten more than she bargained for. A shudder vibrated down her body from recent memory. She hated that this sexy assignation was already over. She sniffed the glass she held and her nose scrunched in distaste. She hated the scent of alcohol.

"Fine." Colin snapped his phone shut and dropped it on his pants. He crawled back to the bed courtesy of his hands and knees, wrapped his arms around her waist and placed a wet kiss between her breasts.

"Sounds like you have to leave."

He sighed. "I do. But don't worry, I'll be back as soon as I can." He rubbed the side of his face across her chest and kissed her shoulder. The soft brush of his hair tickled her collarbone.

Laurie nodded, but knew her face reflected the skepticism coursing through her wild imagination. Her aunt had filled her head with all kinds of tales of male debauchery since she'd been old enough to know the difference between boys and girls. Thus far, Aunt Fiona had been proven correct time and again.

"You don't have to come back. We're even after all."

"Why not? Did I do something wrong?" His body shifted backwards breaking the clench. His erect shaft grazed her leg.

Laurie turned away from his piercing stare. "Would you please put some clothes on?"

"No." He crowded her on the bed, pushing his muscular chest into her sensitive nipples. "Why do you want me gone all of a sudden?"

She refused to look him in the eyes, but answered after a long pause, "My aunt has lectured me endlessly about getting involved with a man in law enforcement. They aren't dependable. I can already see she's right after only a

short time with you.”

He grabbed her face, pulled her head down to his and kissed her on the lips. “That’s not fair.”

“Regardless. You don’t have to come back. You got what you wanted from me. It was nice. Thank you.” She pulled his hands away and sent her gaze to the floor to avoid looking him in the eyes.

He released her, stood up quickly and backed away. His silence didn’t last. “This act you’ve got going is the best performance I’ve ever seen. You should get the Sybil award for Best Multiple Personality.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Her head suddenly throbbed as if a sledgehammer had just bounced off her skull. She put a hand to the back of her head and rubbed.

“So during the next mission when we run into each other, should I just ignore you or what?”

“Mission?” Her nose ran as if a sudden allergy to pain had erupted.

“Shit, Laurie. Your nose is bleeding.” He leaned closer and grabbed the corner of the sheet from her lap. Pushing her head back with his palm, he dabbed at her nose twice and then pressed the sheet firmly beneath her nostrils.

A hot trickle of blood ran down her throat and the sharp metallic taste of it made her gag. She fought to lower her head, but he held her in place. “Keep your head tilted back for a minute.” The tender press of his lips on the side of her face made her ashamed of what she’d implied about his lack of dependability. Perhaps she should give him a chance to prove his intentions, whatever they might be.

“I’m sorry.” She placed her hands on his wrists and stroked the smooth expanse of his forearm.

“Don’t be. It happens.”

“I mean what I said. It wasn’t nice to imply you aren’t dependable.”

“Oh.” His deep sigh made her wonder if she’d already ruined things.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t want to return.”

His lips trailed across her forehead and into her hair. “I’ll be back, darlin’.” His whispered promise warmed her insides.

His cell phone started playing music again. He sighed deeply and ignored

it.

She tipped her head forward. "I think it's stopped bleeding."

Colin nodded, removed his hands from her head and let her hold the sheet. He bent over and scooped up her clothing from the floor. When his phone rang for the third time he snatched it up and shoved it between his shoulder and ear. She let him guide her carefully to the bathroom and handed the pile of clothing through the half closed door as he grunted one-word responses into his phone. He winked at her before she closed the door.

It was ridiculous to be embarrassed after all they'd done together, but she was. The clock on the wall said it was ten fifteen. Before leaving the library she'd told her aunt she'd be home before eleven. She'd have to hustle to make it back home on time.

Splashing water on her face, she managed to get the dried blood off her face. She cleaned herself up and dressed quickly but paused to stare at her reflection, turning her face one way and then the other to see if she looked different. Would her aunt suspect what she'd been doing? She sighed. She shouldn't feel guilty because she'd had sex. But she did anyway.

The light knock at the door startled her. "Laurie?" Colin called out.

She opened the door a crack. He was already dressed and jingled a car key in his hand. The well-worn jeans he'd put back on hugged his hips beautifully. Her eyes strayed below his belt as if she were now addicted to staring at his crotch.

Her eyes shifted to his chest. She tried to be brave, but knew she would miss him and suspected he would eventually break her heart even if he did show up again.

"How's your nose?"

"Fine." Laurie glanced at his concerned face. "I'm fine."

He nodded, although worry lines creased his forehead. "I need to get going. The room is paid for until tomorrow morning at ten if you want to stay—"

"No." She cut him off and brushed past him to exit the bathroom. "I need to go, too."

He grabbed her close, pulling her into his chest before she made it completely through the door. "I will come back." He lowered his lips to hers for a

quick kiss good-bye.

“Okay.” Laurie backed out of his arms, crossed the room and snagged her purse from the floor by the door on the way outside.

The muggy air slammed into her as she moved along the concrete walkway in front of the room. Colin was on her heels as she rounded the hood of her car.

“Give me your home phone number.”

She shook her head. “You can find me at the library.” She slipped into her car and drove away before he could press her for further information.

Laurie’s body felt like melted honey. If it weren’t for her relaxed, satisfied muscles telling her differently, she’d wonder if she hadn’t just dreamed the whole wonderful experience with Colin.

Glancing at the dashboard clock made her stomp the gas pedal to speed up. Laurie didn’t want to be late getting home and have to lie to her aunt again.

* * * *

Colin couldn’t get a flight out of Montgomery Regional Airport until six the next morning. When he called Ken to let him know, a special private charter was sent to pick him up. He touched down at McCarran Airport just before seven the next morning and took a cab to the hotel where Ken, along with his partner Zack Mahon, waited for him to arrive.

Trading one hot-assed town for another after being abruptly ripped away from spending the night with Laurie put him in a foul mood.

Colin knocked at the door of the hotel room and Zack opened it only a crack after a few moments.

“Bout time you got here.” He backed away opening the door wide to let him in.

“I was on vacation.” Colin sent a surly gaze to Ken Davenport, seated at a table in front of a black laptop. “A forced one.”

“Boo-hoo. You smell like sex. I don’t feel sorry for you at all.” Zack secured the door behind him and locked it up.

Colin sniffed the collar of his shirt, caught a delicious musky scent and grinned without verbally confirming Zack's accusation. "So what'd I miss?"

"Salerno snuck into Las Vegas last night. He's in the southwest corner penthouse of this hotel registered under a new alias."

"Are you sure?" Colin had to clench his jaw to keep it from dropping open. He and Zack had spent the better part of last year trailing the bastard, collecting evidence of one despicable action after another, only to have him slip through their fingers at the last minute due to bureaucratic red tape waiting for a warrant. They privately vowed not to go out of their way to use a warrant for the next opportunity.

Salerno was good at acquiring unique things with the purpose of resale. He was also good at killing people to attain his little gadgets if the original owners were reluctant to part with their treasures.

"Yes. A federally protected witness staying at this hotel got a phone call from Salerno last night. Salerno has apparently obtained an item that he wants to sell quickly. The federal witness he called is setting up a transaction meeting tonight."

"Where?"

"There's a private party scheduled on the eighth floor sponsored by some crème de la crème art curator's society. Salerno is crashing the party to meet with a third party and negotiate a quick deal."

"What's the plan?"

"You and Zack will circulate among the art curator crowd, find Salerno and keep him under observation. Once Salerno meets with his contact, one of you will stay at the party and keep tabs on him. Meanwhile, the other will slip up to his room, gain access to the penthouse by way of the express elevator and crack his room safe to extract the item."

"What is it?"

"It's a piece of jewelry, an antique ring. It was stolen from a wealthy family in France during the occupation. It came up for auction anonymously and the family has been trying to get a hold of it without success."

"We can't prove it, but we're certain Salerno stole the bill of sale from the auction house and then killed the collector to gain it. A representative of the family is the third party for tonight's negotiation." Ken rubbed his weary-looking

eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“So we’re stealing it from Salerno?”

“Right. If he operates as he always does, he’ll make the family pay an exorbitant viewing fee before brokering the final deal. When he takes the family representative to his room, it won’t be there.”

“I’m guessing the family won’t be too happy.”

“Right. They *will* put Salerno out of our misery for us.”

“Who’s waiting and watching and who’s breaking and entering?”

Ken didn’t look up from his keyboard. “I don’t care. Flip a coin.”

“Rock, paper, scissors?” Zack asked.

Colin mentally rolled his eyes in dismay. “Whatever.”

Zack grinned. “Let’s do it. Winner gets the easy job of breaking and entering.” Colin groaned. He rarely won rock, paper, scissors battles with Zack. He also hated being a waiter.

“One...two...three.”

Colin shot his hand out flat, signifying paper. Zack pounded his fist against his other palm, denoting rock. Colin smacked his hand on Zack’s fist. “And I win. Paper covers rock. You’re the waiter. Suit up, monkey boy.”

“One other thing,” Ken added, “the intruder in tonight’s mission also has to seduce the occupant of one of the other penthouse suites, Glenda Thacker. She’s the rich patron and one of the elite sponsors of tonight’s party.”

Zack laughed. “Why do I suddenly think I’m getting the better end of the deal?”

“Let me guess, she’s ugly, disgusting and evil, but stinking rich. She loves to buy younger men to appease her prurient lusts?” Colin planted his hands on his hips.

“Bingo.” Ken smiled. “Lucky for us, she’s rumored to adore dark hair and dark eyes in her men. You’ll be perfect. Suck up to her, get her to take you to her penthouse, then you can knock her out and proceed to Salerno’s room while he’s negotiating with the family at the party.

“Zack will watch out for his departure and warn you if he leaves the eighth floor to retrieve the ring you’ll be in his room stealing. Any questions?”

“What’s my egress?”

“Rooftop. Once you have the ring from Salerno’s room, send a signal to op-tech. We have a diversion planned in the form of a fire alarm set for a precise time. You’ll take the stairs up to the roof and everyone else will take the stairs down. We expect that Salerno will guess it’s a diversion and ignore the alarm.”

“Isn’t it a big pain in the ass to explain away a bogus fire alarm?”

“Yes. That’s why op-tech will disable a specific camera so as not to get caught. Another agent will pull it and exit thereby making an anonymous escape path for you.”

“Will I do that?” Zack asked.

“No, another team will be assisting with both op-tech and the escape diversion tactics.”

Colin and Zack exchanged glances. It was unlike Ken to involve outsiders.

“We’ve set up an op-tech overseer from another black ops team to cover communications.” Ken stood up from the round table sporting several computers and pieces of standard equipment beyond the black laptop he was using.

“An agent named Frankie will be your eyes and ears during the operation. She’ll have communications command for the operation tonight.”

“Frankie’s a girl?” Zack remarked. He sent an eye roll over to Colin conveying his displeasure. He hadn’t had good luck working with women. Narrowly escaping a femme fatale the first time and thereafter a series of ultra clingy women looking to settle down and make babies. Zack’s record of bad experiences had taken their toll on his view of women’s capabilities in the field of black ops.

“She’s the best on my team.” A new voice sounded from the open door of the adjoining room.

Zack twisted his head toward the door. “Says you,” he muttered under his breath.

Colin sized up the stranger with a quick glance. He was tall with curly blond hair. The unusual light color of his stone-cold blue eyes probably unnerved everyone he met. Colin had seen warmer eyes on killers with no depth of soul.

Ken promptly introduced the chilly-eyed stranger. “This is Paul Kelly. He and his team will be working with us today.”

“Why?” Colin knew Ken hated working with other teams and sharing anything.

“My team’s already ensconced and seamlessly hacked into the communication grid of this hotel. We were running drills,” Paul responded quietly, as if proud he’d had the foresight to place his own team members in the perfect place for this operation.

“They’ll have different responsibilities. We’re going after Salerno.”

“So his team found Salerno?” Colin asked.

“That’s right.” Paul Kelly responded with even more pride in his tone and a satisfied smile slid into place.

“How do we know it’s really Salerno?”

Ken sighed, “Paul’s group caught the message by accident. But our communication guys confirmed the voiceprint. It’s definitely Salerno.”

“I heard a rumor you let him get away last year. I thought you might like to try again,” Paul remarked. “Maybe with the help from my team, you’ll be able to pull off your mission this time.”

“Fuck off.” Ken gave Paul a harsh stare. “We didn’t have a choice last time. Trust me, it wasn’t my decision to let him go.”

“Sorry,” Paul said, but Colin didn’t think he looked very remorseful.

“So what’s our plan? Are we going to take him this time?” Colin asked.

“No. We’ll let the family kill him for reneging on their deal. Less blood on our hands that way.”

Zack huffed. “Since when do we care about blood on our hands.”

The discussion of blood gave Colin a start. He looked down at his hands expecting to see Laurie’s blood still there from last night’s nosebleed.

He’d found a spot on his palm and washed it off when he did a cursory clean up at the airport awaiting his flight. Laurie hadn’t been far out of his mind since they’d parted. Every so often he’d catch a whiff of musk. The memory of her legs opening as he feasted on her clit would slide into his brain to torture him.

Colin planned to head back to a certain Montgomery library as soon as this assignment was over. He’d camp out in the lobby of that library until she turned up.

For the present, he tried to pay attention to the plan at hand. First up, he had to seduce Salerno's penthouse suite neighbor and lure her up to her room with the promise of sexual satisfaction. Thankfully, he didn't have to fuck Glenda. The very thought of faking interest in another woman only called to mind his previous evening. He didn't have to fake it with Laurie.

He and Zack spent the rest of the day doing mission prep and finalized all the plans for this evening. An hour before the assignment began, they dressed for their parts.

Colin got an Armani custom fit tux and an invitation for the exclusive eighth floor party. Zack got a cheap waiter's tux and a remedial course in balancing trays of champagne flutes and appetizers.

Paul Kelly brought their ear bud communication devices and button cameras. "These will enable you to speak with each other and Frankie during the mission. However, you can't turn them on during the party on the eighth floor."

"Why not?" Colin grouched. "Doesn't that defeat the purpose of having them at all?"

"The planners of the event have a very sophisticated alarm system to prevent anyone from taking pictures of the art tonight. Unfortunately, these transmitters also work on that frequency. We don't have time to get specialized ones."

"How about button cameras?"

"No. Those will also be confiscated. Zack will be able to use this transmitter in the kitchen area. And you can use yours when you get to the penthouse."

Colin and Zack exchanged glances. "Whatever."

Frankie called over the designated frequency to test the equipment ensuring it worked properly for the mission.

"Dark Spirit initiating radio check. Can you hear me, Buccaneer?" Frankie's smooth clear voice tickled his ear.

"Copy that. I read you." Colin adjusted the fit of the small device in his ear.

"Diablo, radio check," Frankie called Zack to confirm his communication device worked.

Zack smiled and a goofy expression appeared on his face before he answered. "This is Diablo. I copy you, Dark Spirit." He said her call sign like an endearment and earned a curious look from Colin.

"Excellent," Frankie's voice purred.

Colin felt like he was intruding. He rolled his eyes and did his best to ignore them.

"How will I turn the transmitter on and off?" Zack asked.

"The top button of your waiter's shirt. Press once and you'll hear the word 'activated', press it again and you'll hear the word, 'terminating'."

"Okay."

"Make sure you wait until you hear 'terminating' before you leave the kitchen or a very loud, ugly noise will deafen you." Frankie's throaty voice informed him.

Zack grinned. "I'd hate for that to happen, because if I were deaf, I might miss an important announcement from you."

"Right," she murmured. Frankie didn't respond further.

Colin wondered what in the hell was going on. Turning to Zack, he noticed another goofy grin.

"What's up with you?"

He shrugged. "I like her voice. Makes my dick get hard."

"Thanks for sharing your most intimate thoughts." Colin squinted in disbelief and promptly rolled his eyes.

Frankie's voice sounded in his head. "I can still hear you two, you know."

Zack looked towards the ceiling. "Was that remark inappropriate?"

Frankie didn't respond for a few seconds, but finally said, "Yes, it was."

"Then I'll be sure to avoid saying that in the future when I know you're listening. Diablo out." The goofy expression remained in place. He sobered up when Colin scrunched his eyebrows and thumped him on the shoulder.

"Buccaneer out," Colin said. He turned to Zack. "What was that? Sexual harassment isn't exactly your style."

"Don't know. Something about her voice lights me up."

“Douse it. Besides she probably looks like a mud hen.”

Frankie came back on, “I heard that too, and by the way, even mud hens look good to one another.”

Zack’s grin grew even wider. He winked at Colin and asked, “Are you implying I look like a mud hen, princess?”

“Not at all. I’m sure you look like a mud cock. Is that what you are, Zack, a mud cock?” She enunciated the word ‘cock’ both times she said it like she was stroking one. Colin felt like he was in the middle of a porn movie.

Zack’s expression softened. “Not fair to tease me like that, princess,” he muttered. “When we meet. I’ll get even.”

“Unless I’m an ugly mud hen, right?”

“Regardless of what you look like. You already know what your voice does to that particular piece of my anatomy. You want me, princess, all you have to do is ask.”

Frankie cleared her throat. “I’ll keep that in mind. Dark Spirit out.”

* * * *

At precisely eight-thirty that evening, Colin waltzed into the eighth floor curator’s art and antiquity party anxious to complete this task and get back to his vacation and Laurie.

Across the room, he spotted Zack wielding a tray of champagne-filled glasses and headed for him. He surveyed the room looking for Glenda, his ticket to the penthouse suites. According to Zack’s earlier report from the kitchen, Glenda was wearing a flamboyant red sequined dress, which was not as loud as her earsplitting laugh.

“You’ll hear her before you see her,” Zack reported in a low tone as he offered Colin the tray. “Her face makes me glad I’m the waiter for this mission. Some women just don’t understand the fifteenth plastic surgery doesn’t look natural.”

“Great. Thanks for the warning and the encouragement.” Colin grabbed a glass of champagne from Zack with a salute and circulated around the party searching for Glenda.

Finding her easily when a boisterous laugh erupted from a small gathering to his left, Colin followed the sound. Her red dress looked like a flashing beacon he didn't want to pursue. Taking a deep breath he centered himself and made his way toward the group of people to entice his prey.

He pretended to watch a painting on his right as he then bumped into Glenda with medium force. He turned to apologize profusely and gave her a practiced appreciative once over, exuding his interest. He was a great actor.

Face shaped into concern, Colin put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "I'm terribly sorry. Please forgive my clumsiness." Something about touching a shoulder made women relax.

Glenda was no different. She grabbed his arm securing him to her side and blatantly rubbed his chest provocatively without letting go of his bicep. "You're forgiven if you stay and introduce yourself, darling boy."

Colin gave her his most practiced bad boy grin and pretended to be enraptured by her affectionate gesture.

A quick round of introductions were made in the group and just as fast the guests excused themselves for one thing or another. He and Glenda were suddenly alone discussing rare sexual art in seventeenth century sketches of couples in the throes of passion expressed by coal markers.

"My darling boy, I have the most scandalous pictures in my penthouse suite. They're positively sinful. I'm donating them to the charity event tomorrow. Will you be at the auction?"

"No. Sorry. I'll be leaving early tomorrow."

"What a shame. It would simply be a crime for you to miss out on at least seeing the most erotic piece. Would you like to come up and get a preview?" Her hand slid to his hip and her fingertips dug into his butt.

He stifled the urge to shudder. He leaned close, getting a lungful of the gag-worthy gardenia perfume she'd apparently doused herself in and forced a smile on his lips instead.

"I'd never impose on you like that. What would people say if we deserted the party and went to your room?" Colin played coy to reel her in, but knew she'd more than likely drag him to her penthouse suite by his nuts.

Over Glenda's shoulder, he noticed a woman enter the room. The cut and color of her dress caught his attention. Watching her walk, Colin thought the way

she moved seemed familiar. The woman was facing away.

His gaze traveled from spiky heels to nicely rounded hips and ascended to her blonde upswept hair do. His heart sped up when it occurred to him who the beautiful figure dressed in the slinky ice blue evening gown reminded him of. He stared at the lovely and very familiar bare back. Colin willed her to turn around so he could see her face to be certain.

Glenda's hand slithered to his crotch to rub his cock. Colin made the mission-critical error of forgetting to pay attention to the task at hand in favor of staring at the mysterious woman across the room. His fatal mistake forced him to jump away from Glenda's lusty attentions. He followed by pegging her with a distasteful glare after getting caught staring at another woman.

Glenda frowned and turned to stare at the woman in the ice blue dress just as she turned around.

Holy shit.

Across the room, Laurie grinned when she recognized him staring. She winked, gracefully snagged a glass of champagne from Zack's tray and headed toward him and the now fuming Glenda.

Laurie was about to crash in on his mission to seduce another woman.

God help him.

Chapter 7

Rachel wandered into the curator's art and snore party wishing she had a more important role to play in tonight's mission. She kept a close eye on her watch. She had one function to perform tonight. It was easy. Pull a certain fire alarm at a certain time on another floor of the hotel and otherwise wait on standby in case needed.

Whatever that meant.

No other element of tonight's mission had been explained to her. It was need-to-know only and, apparently, she didn't need to know.

Frankie told her there was a party on the eighth floor she could wander around until time for her task. It was better than standing around the downstairs lobby pretending to be waiting for someone for an hour as if she'd been stood up.

Inwardly, she sighed and strolled into another room of the party as the strains of classical music followed her. Never having endured a music appreciation class, she had no earthly idea of what concerto or canon played, but it must be piped in. She hadn't discovered a live orchestra yet.

The eighth floor party level looked like the recreation of a Tudor mansion. Once inside the hall, she sweet talked the guy holding the door into believing she forgot her invitation. He scanned her slinky dress, stopping to visually fondle her breasts, then lifted his eyes and winked. Looking over one shoulder, he opened the ornate wooden door and let her slide into an impressive entryway. As the door closed behind her, an elevator next to the entrance opened and two expensively clad men exited. They didn't pay any attention to her, intent on their own conversation. They'd headed to the left and into what looked like a large parlor. Groups of richly dressed people were ensconced in classically decorated rooms to either side of the entry. She headed to the right, where a library-like room waited.

The sedate party didn't interest her. Rachel was impatient and antsy for some unfathomable reason. She kept moving with the hopes something would

happen to liven things up until the designated time when she'd slip out and head for the third floor.

A gorgeous waiter circulated in the center of the room and offered champagne to the patrons. She headed in his direction. Getting rip-roaring drunk wasn't in tonight's mission plan, but she could at least sip some expensive bubbly during her wait. Champagne was her favorite alcoholic beverage.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a couple standing so close together they were practically in an intimate embrace. The much older woman in a flaming red dress was pawing at a much younger man.

The stud in question registered a familiar pang at only a glance, so she turned to study him further. He also saw her. His head snapped up to stare. Lips parted, he stared unblinkingly for several seconds.

Holy crap. It was Tommy. What was he doing here?

The man she'd rescued from a Colombian drug lord's compound stood across the room being accosted by a woman far too old for him. Snagging a glass of champagne from the gorgeous waiter, she headed over to rescue Tommy from the clutches of yet another aggressive woman.

Tonight she'd make time to finish what they'd started on that iron bed in Columbia.

* * * *

Glenda said something Colin missed because he was transfixed by Laurie's imminent arrival. He couldn't think beyond the blood roaring in his ears waiting for the train wreck about to happen. Shifting his gaze to Glenda, he queried, "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I asked who she was. But it's clear you prefer staring at her to coming upstairs with me."

Colin put a hand on Glenda's shoulder to stop her but she ducked away adding, "I hope you two will be very happy together." She stormed off, her head held high.

Laurie's sexy perfume reached him a half a second before she stepped into his personal space.

“Been cuffed to any beds lately?” She smiled and took a healthy drink of champagne.

“No.” Releasing a long slow breath, Colin watched Glenda, and his best hope of getting into Salerno’s penthouse tonight, slip away.

“Pity.”

“What are you doing here?” The tone of his voice betrayed his frustration of losing Glenda.

Laurie didn’t seem to notice. Or was she Rachel this time? One of her personalities leaned in and whispered, “It’s a secret. I can’t tell you.” She pulled away, gifted him with a seductive smile and added, “No matter what delicious torture you devise for me this time.”

Colin huffed out a deep breath and watched glumly as Glenda stomped out of the library. Across the room, he saw that Zack had witnessed Glenda’s departure. He shot Colin an inquisitive look then shifted his gaze to stare long and hard at Laurie. Colin sent him a signal to follow Glenda. He did, but not before shaking his head on his way out.

“What’s wrong, did Slutty Red Riding Hood turn you down?” Laurie downed the rest of her champagne and winked.

Colin grabbed her arm and pushed her towards the door Glenda, and Zack, had exited through. “Not exactly.”

“You should be more careful around women, Tommy. I’m not always going to be available to rescue you.” She cocked a brow. “And you’re welcome, by the way.”

Ah ha. It must be Rachel with him tonight. He’d given her his cover name back in Columbia. Laurie had his real name.

Colin stopped. “I didn’t need rescuing.”

She giggled and took another gulp of her champagne. “Lighten up. She was way too old for you.”

Shaking his head, he closed his eyes for a count of three. When he opened them, Glenda was still gone and he was screwed. “I needed something from her.”

“On the other hand I have something you definitely need.” Rachel glanced at her watch. “But I’m on a tight schedule. Want to go find a private place?”

Colin tried to comprehend her dramatic personality change. Laurie had

been so shy and girly. Plus, she'd told him she didn't drink. "I thought you didn't drink."

A single bark of laughter came from her lips. "Since when?" She scrunched her brows together for a moment. "Are you feeling okay?"

"No. I'm in the middle of something and you scared away my ticket for admission."

"Well, I have some time to kill. Anything I could help you with to reacquire your admittance?" She moved closer and stroked his hip with an intent he wished he had time to act on.

But he didn't.

"I need to get a keycard for the express elevator to the penthouse suites. Like right now, this second."

She brightened up and her face lit with exuberance. "I might be able to get that."

"Really?"

"Sure. Be right back." Rachel was gone from his side in a flash. Colin wondered if he was dreaming. Perhaps he was dozing on the charter flight and hadn't even made it to Las Vegas yet.

Zack reentered the room and sent him a scowl. Nope, he's not dreaming. He approached, stopped to offer Colin a fresh glass of champagne and whispered, "So what mission plan are you using and who's the hot chick in the blue dress?"

"Long story."

"Great. We'll have plenty of time for you to share it when we're both waiting in the unemployment line."

"We may have to implement plan B."

"Oh? We 'may' have to?" Zack huffed with a healthy dose of sarcasm. "Salerno just showed up. Figure it out. What are you going to do?"

Rachel returned and inserted herself between the two of them. She lifted another glass of champagne from Zack's tray and winked at him. "All set."

Colin shrugged. "Back to plan A." If Zack was surprised about the change to a different female helping the cause, he didn't show it. He nodded once and moved between them to circulate around the room with his tray. Colin knew he'd

head for the kitchen and wait for his call that he was in the penthouse.

“I don’t have much time to help you.” She swallowed half of the new glass of champagne. “If we’re going, let’s go now.”

“We’re going.” He took her elbow and guided her towards the bank of elevators “How did you get a key card?”

She pressed her lips flat and shot him a beseeching look. “Will you think less of me if I told you I lifted it from a man I just saw get off the elevators?”

Colin grinned. “Nope. I’m grateful. Let’s go.”

There were two elevators that were exclusively for penthouse use. One was express from the lobby to the penthouses and the one they stepped into went from the eighth floor directly to the penthouse floor.

The elevator arrived and opened immediately after Rachel stuck the card in the slot as if it had been waiting for them. Once inside the car, she inserted the card into the slot inside and the doors slid shut cutting off the sounds of the party.

There was apparently no button to push since the elevator didn’t go anywhere else with the exception of the penthouse.

If Frankie, the op-tech from the other team, was doing her job, the camera in the ceiling of the elevator was disabled.

Colin scanned upper corner where the camera was mounted and noted that the red light was off. He planted his butt in the back corner of the small space and pulled Rachel close. She didn’t seem worried about the camera either.

Grinning as she snuggled up close, she placed her hands on his chest and tilted her head. She licked her bottom lip suggestively and he couldn’t help but kiss her. Her lips opened with little resistance. Two second later his tongue dueled with hers, each of them trying to devour the other first.

He flashed back to Columbia and the final kiss they’d shared in the clearing before parting. It was borderline animalistic. Laurie, no, this was Rachel, moaned and his cock thickened appropriately, wanting to come out and play. It occurred to him on some level that the girl in his arms right now kissed differently than she had last night. She moaned again, bit his lower lip lightly and he didn’t care what her name was today. He wanted her. Naked. Soon.

If not for the personal nature of the mission he was on, he’d lay her down in the elevator and fuck her before they made it to the top floor.

Glancing at his watch as they arrived at the penthouse level, he knew he had a little time to give to his lust. He wanted Salerno taken care of worse than he wanted to get laid, surprisingly enough.

Colin broke the sultry kiss with a reluctant groan as the doors opened and peeked his head out of the doors to ensure they were alone. Grabbing her soft hand he tugged her along behind him and headed to Salerno's room.

The penthouse floor had four suites, one at each corner of this top-level, north, south, east and west. None of which could be seen from where he stood. A bonus. The elevator was situated in the center of a circular hallway. Each room was at a corner. According to the layout, the stairs to the roof were opposite the elevator and behind him. He saw the sign pointing to the roof exit and noted it for his future departure.

Since Colin didn't have to waste time subduing Glenda, he was ahead of schedule by more than fifteen minutes.

Mission protocol probably demanded he knock Rachel out just like he'd planned for Glenda. Unfortunately, he didn't have a place to leave her sleeping safely, so he pulled her along with him. If push came to shove, given her incredible Wonder Woman skills, she could quite possibly crawl down the outside of the building and thereby escape even faster than he planned to do.

They went directly to Salerno's penthouse suite at the southern corner. Colin pulled out a gadget that looked like a stick of gum. He stuck the key card into the device that turned any key card universal. The green light on the door lit up and clicked, signaling entrance accepted before he had even turned on his nifty tool.

That meant he had Salerno's key.

Colin turned to stare at Rachel. "Shit. You lifted the card from the guy we're robbing?"

She crossed her arms and squinted. "We're robbing someone?" A mischievous smile lit her face.

The ding of the elevator prompted Colin to open the door to the suite and push her into the room. Ignoring the pinch of lust igniting his libido, he searched the suite committing to memory the lay out. The safe Salerno used during his stay at the hotel was in the spare bedroom. He headed in that direction and turned on his transmitter to contact Zack.

He keyed the ear piece. “Diablo, this is Buccaneer, do you copy?”

After several seconds, Zack responded, “Go.”

“I’m in. Where’s our friend?”

“He’s busy. Do your thing. I’ll let you know if he moves. Diablo out.”

“Copy that. Buccaneer out.”

“Sexy spy talk or was that sexy criminal talk? Either way, you’re turning me on.”

“You didn’t hear that.” Colin approached the large walk-in closet in the spare bedroom of the large suite. He strolled through the door noting the closet was bigger than the room where he’d spent his childhood. Beneath a carpet square in the center of the space was the floor safe. “You don’t know that I’m a spy or a criminal.”

“It’s a good guess.”

Colin kneeled in the closet next to where he knew the safe resided.

“Either way, will you keep a look out for me?”

“Sure.”

He used the combination they’d acquired from an illegal hack of the hotel’s security system. “Laurie, hand me the flashlight up there on the wall.”

She gave him a quizzical look before a sudden frown creased her brows. “How soon they forget?”

“What?”

“I’m Rachel, remember?”

He shook his head feigning confusion as if distracted by his task. “Right. Rachel.” He grinned. “I knew that. I was just testing you.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Perhaps because my name isn’t really Tommy.”

Rachel smiled and licked her lips. “Whatever your name is, I just hope you haven’t forgotten your skills in bed.”

“Not a chance.” *And certainly not since last night*, he thought and tucked away the unease about her not commenting about being with him only yesterday.

Intimately.

She turned away and positioned herself against the frame of the door. One shapely hip leaned against the trim, ostensibly to keep watch for Salerno. He shook his head and stopped thinking about how lovely her ass was. She sidetracked him. He should be grateful that she wasn't staring at him while he worked.

For some reason, Colin didn't want her to watch him commit felony safecracking and robbery, regardless of the fact that Salerno was the worst scum-sucking criminal he'd ever personally encountered and completely devoid of any humanity in his dealings with others. Colin had watched Salerno kill more than one innocent in the name of personal commerce.

After several seconds she said, "Hurry up. I'd like to test out the nice comfy-looking bed in here."

He frowned. "Quit teasing me. We can't mess up the sheets or they'd know we were here. First rule of the spy business darlin', avoid detection at all costs."

"Duh. I knew that. Maybe I was just testing you." She crossed her arms and leaned a slim shoulder against the door. "That's why you'll have to bend me over the easy chair to fuck me."

His mouth fell open a little before he could stop it. He snapped his lips shut as his cock twitched to life. Colin managed a smile. "I'll hurry," he whispered, his voice husky with lust. They didn't have time to do anything over an easy chair. Did they?

Colin entered the final number of the stolen combination on the keypad and opened the floor safe's heavy metal door.

Inside the small safe were several valuable items, but not as much as Colin would have expected. Salerno usually had several scams going on at the same time.

He perused the contents and grabbed the signet ring he was here to steal, then placed it in the small inner pocket of his jacket. He also grabbed a two-inch stack of bearer bonds worth ten thousand dollars and stuck them in the other inner jacket pocket made especially for document-sized items.

The two stacks of cash in hundreds went into his outer pockets and the antique pocket watch and a huge diamond engagement ring were shoved into his

pants pocket.

“Are you done yet?”

“Why? Is someone coming?” Colin rose ready to fight and flee.

“No. But I’d like to.”

Colin laughed and closed the safe with a loud snick. “So when would you like to come?”

“Now.” She looked over her shoulder from the closet door and smiled seductively.

Colin strode over to her as she turned to face him. They collided in the center of the closet grabbing each other for another ferocious kiss. He slid one arm around her back and pressed her hips forward into his fully erect cock. Cupping one breast he flicked a pebbled nipple with his thumb. Her hands on the move as well, grabbed his ass and ground into him.

“I’ve been dreaming about this since Columbia.” Her whispered confession gave him mental pause.

They kissed or rather they devoured each other as visions of having her bent over an easy chair danced in his brain. There was no denying he wanted her, whatever name she went by.

His rational brain pondered the strangeness of Laurie versus Rachel. He’d been with Laurie last night. Twenty-four hours ago he’d had his mouth buried in her pussy contentedly licking her clit. If he were to ask, he suspected Rachel would either deny or pretend she didn’t remember this auspicious event.

There were other differences. Where Laurie was shy, Rachel was brazen. As if to illustrate his silent point, she grabbed his cock and squeezed. He groaned and slid his hand from her lower spine to her ass.

She pulled away but her hand remained fastened to the front of his pants. “Follow me.”

“Anywhere.”

Rachel backed out of the closet pulling him along by his rampant erection. He was so turned on it was a wonder his cock hadn’t already unzipped his pants from the inside.

The bed came into his line of vision first, but she led him to a low-backed side chair facing the bed. It was the perfect height for what she had in mind. She

didn't stop moving until her hips landed on the chair back.

She grinned, released her grip on his cock and started to turn around but Colin stopped her. "So I'm dying to know—"

"What?" She already sounded out of breath and his cock bobbed in delight.

"Are you wearing panties for this evening's activities?"

"What do you think?"

"I think if you are, you won't be for long."

"Perhaps you should..." she laughed and wiggled her hips against him, "discover for yourself."

Colin grinned. The front slit in her dress wasn't as provocatively pronounced as in Columbia but worked well for his hunting purposes. He parted the fabric's opening, and slid his hands around her silky outer thighs. Never breaking eye contact, he pushed the dress towards her waist, bunching it over his forearms. Fingertips scaling north, he eventually encountered her smooth naked butt cheeks. He cupped each and squeezed softly. Sliding his fingers around the front to explore, he brushed a small silk triangle covering her mound.

Further groping of her bikini area gave him the information he sought. He grinned once he identified her panties of choice.

A thong.

"Ah. I see you've thrown me a minor challenge this time." He slid a long finger underneath the edge and easily tested the wetness level of her pussy by inserting his finger as deep as he could. She moaned and smiled as he pumped his finger in and out a couple of times. She was soaked. Perfect. He removed his hand from between her legs, brought the digit to his mouth and licked his finger wet with her creamy delectable essence as she watched.

"Umm. Delicious."

Her eyes slid shut halfway and she licked her lips. She pushed him away and fell to her knees before he could even think the words 'blow job', let alone say them. She unbuttoned and unzipped his pants, fished through the top of his boxers and had his cock out before he could blink. She had his hard dick in her mouth before his eyes opened again. Her tongue danced around the tip before she closed her lips around the swollen pulsing head. He grunted when she sucked him

deeper.

Colin placed his hands on the chair back to keep his balance as she pulled his cock out only to suck him in deeper.

“Jesus, that feels incredible.”

Her head tilted back. She pulled him forward with her mouth still suctioned on to his dick and rested the back of her head against the chair too. With her head resting, she put her hands on his hips and leveraged his cock in and out of her hot mouth. After the third time he moved his own hips, effectively fucking her mouth. The very thought almost made him come. His toes curled to hold off the inevitable for a second.

As much as he enjoyed her mouth, he wanted to slide his cock into her tight body.

His gravelly voice managed, “You promised to bend over the chair.”

She pulled off with a pop, laughed out loud and stood. “So I did.” Her lipstick was smeared. He looked down. There was lipstick on his cock.

“Jesus,” he whispered closing his eyes in bliss.

“Tell me you’re one of those guys that carries a condom in his wallet at all times.”

He reached to his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. “I’m one of those guys that carries a condom in his wallet at all times.”

“Perfect. Perhaps your call sign should be Boy Scout instead of Buccaneer.”

“Trust me, I’m no Boy Scout.”

“Good.”

Colin pulled the foil packet out of his wallet and she snagged it from him. He returned his wallet to its home in his pants as she tore open the packet with her teeth and sheathed him in latex. Looking down, he saw the stain of her lipstick beneath the protection.

“You are, without a doubt, the sexiest woman I’ve ever met.” *Well, technically one of two.*

Grinning, he turned her around, lifted her dress bunching it at her waist. He squatted and slid her thong to the floor one-handed. Planting a brief kiss on

her butt, Colin stood again ready for pleasure. She bent over the back of the chair offering her perfect ass to his view. She stepped one foot out of her panties and widened her stance. Colin grabbed his cock with one hand and her ass with the other.

He inserted his dick inside her pussy an inch and paused to relish the glorious feeling of sex. Impatient, she immediately shot her hips backwards and three more inches of his cock disappeared inside her body as he watched.

“I want you deeper.”

“Give me a second, darlin’. I don’t want to bruise you.”

She turned her head and glanced over her shoulder, her expression displayed disbelief. “For God’s sake, I’m not some prissy little virgin. Fuck me, already.” Her hips wiggled impatiently to punctuate her request.

He thrust himself deep inside her heat and watched her reaction. “Yes.” She grinned. “More.” She turned and bent forward over the chair. “Harder.”

Colin captured her hips and drove his cock as deep as he could. She let out a small shriek of pleasure. From the cushion of the chair where her face was planted, he heard, “Harder, damn it.”

The smell of her arousal wafted past his nose and he pulled his hips back not quite leaving her body before slamming forward into her tight core again. He soon set a hard and fast rhythm then slid his fingers around the front of her thigh to rub her clit.

She jumped when he reached his tactile target and sexy moaning ensued from the seat of the chair. The sounds of her cries of pleasure were taking a toll on his limited control. He wanted to come. He wanted her to come first.

The fingers that brushed rapidly across her clit were drenched. He wanted to bury his face between her legs again wondering if they had time. He pounded his cock into her wanting to send her over the edge.

“Come for me, darlin’. I can’t wait to hear you scream my name again.” The sound of her low husky moans sent him closer to the pinnacle of release.

She screamed, “Buccaneer,” and stiffened in climax. Her lovely back arched off the chair slightly and the iron grip of her pussy clenched his dick in orgasm.

Colin couldn’t hold his release any longer. He thrust into her pulsing heat

one last time and exploded. The power of the release surprised him. He'd just been with her the day before. Until yesterday it had been a while but he'd thought the desperate edge would be gone. It wasn't. He wanted more. Glancing at his watch, he noted the time and realized not as much time had elapsed as he'd thought.

Bracing his hips against her ass, still fully embedded, his legs shook wanting to collapse beneath him. He leaned forward and rested his face on her back trapping her to the chair. She smelled so good. He licked her back once. Then he nipped her soft flesh below one shoulder blade. She flinched but didn't say anything. He promptly licked the spot and then sucked on it. Even through the dim light of the moonlight filtering through the window, he could see he'd left his mark. Perfect. His own personal test to prove she and Laurie were one and the same.

Several seconds later, she laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Us. We're funny."

"Why?" Colin lifted himself off her and staggered back a step. He saw the hickey he'd left on purpose just before she stood and turned.

Her grin was infectious. "I haven't figured out why I want you so much. But even after you've fucked me senseless, it just doesn't seem like enough."

It was Colin's turn to laugh. "Let's meet. Name the place and time. I'll be there." The room smelled like sex. He inhaled deeply satisfied yet again and waited for her to tell him when they could spend some time together.

She sobered and glanced up and down his body before answering. "I don't know. I don't have much free time."

"What, you work twenty-four hours a day? Don't you get time off?"

She shrugged. "It varies."

Colin had questions burning in his mind about her seemingly dual personality. Would Rachel admit to knowing about Laurie?

He didn't want to freak her out, but he was dying to figure out what was up with the two personalities. He squinted. "You know, you remind me of someone. Did you ever work in the CIA?"

She crossed her arms. "Do I need to be jealous?"

Colin almost smiled but stopped himself. He didn't usually worry about whether the women he slept with got jealous. He wasn't exactly looking to settle down. "The better question is why you're jealous at all since we've only had sex twice?"

He didn't like playing cold-hearted bastard. He didn't feel that way about her, or Laurie. He didn't think either of them was trying to trap him into a relationship. He was just fascinated by their peculiarity. He didn't even know which woman he preferred. The honest truth was he liked them both.

She frowned. "You're right. I have no right to be jealous. I'll shut up." Straightening her dress with a sharp tug, she scooped her thong off the carpet and stalked past him toward the bathroom without another word.

He followed close behind her, right into the bathroom and realized she hadn't answered his question about working for the CIA. "Don't be mad." He disposed of the condom in the toilet, flushed and quickly cleaned up.

"I'm not mad." She quickly tidied herself with several tissues and shot the clump into the toilet as his condom swirled away. She negotiated her thong back in place under her dress without looking at him.

Watching her out of the corner of his eyes, his cock got hard in his hand. He willed the erection to stop growing since he didn't have time for anymore sex right now. He shouldn't have taken the time for the first round. But then he saw a smudge of lipstick and it became a meaningless exercise in futility. He tucked his now semi-hard dick back into his boxers and zipped his pants.

"You look like you're mad."

Leaning over the sink, she used a tissue to clean up her face smeared slightly with lipstick. "Well, I'm not." She glanced at her watch as if noting the time. "I've got to go. Thanks for the fabulous fuck."

He grabbed her arm. "Stop it. I shouldn't have said you 'can't' be jealous."

Her tight-lipped smile belied her next words. "I have no claim on you."

"Do you want one?"

Rachel paused mid-stride and a grin lit her face suddenly. "Do you?"

"Maybe." He wanted to know her secrets. He plowed ahead playing an unfair game with her. "We could meet in Alabama?"

“What?” Her eyes widened and then just as suddenly they narrowed in confusion. “Why Alabama?” Doubt crossed her face. Her gaze went sort of blank and shifted to look over his shoulder.

Colin shrugged. “Alabama is as good a place as any. I could meet you at the Montgomery Public Library? You know where that is, right?” He watched for her reaction and wasn’t disappointed, although it wasn’t quite the result he’d wanted.

She faltered and backed up into the sink. She shot a hand up to her forehead and pressed until the tips of her fingers turned white with the effort as if in excruciating pain. Seconds later, a thin line of blood trickled out of her nose.

“Shit. I’m sorry, Rachel.” Colin grabbed the pristine white hand towel from the rack next to the sink and placed it on her nose before the drop of blood escaped her face. Something hidden in the towel clattered to the sink top, but he ignored it.

He tilted her head back and pressed the towel harder to stem the flow.

“I have to go,” she mumbled through the towel.

“Not yet.”

She stiffened and pushed him. “I’m on a mission too. I have to do something important in ten minutes.”

“What?” He pushed the towel back to her face.

“It’s a secret.”

There was a knock at the door and a far away heavily accented voice said, “Turn down service.”

Chapter 8

Rachel's head hurt so bad she couldn't think straight. The nosebleed freaked her out, but not as much as the man with her.

It occurred to her that she didn't even know his real name. If it wasn't Tommy, she didn't know what else to call him except Buccaneer. The thought made her want to laugh out loud.

She'd screamed his call sign when she climaxed earlier against the chair. Her spy lover had very talented fingers. From Columbia, she already knew his mouth was clever. Her womb clenched in memory of his mouth sucking on her and licking her to climax even weeks later.

Unfortunately, she had a mission to complete. This booty call had been wonderful but ultimately a very bad idea. She needed to go and pull a certain fire alarm on the third floor of this hotel. Her time was running out. If she failed her task after deviating from her mission parameters, her boss would surely fire her this time.

"Shit. We need to hide." He whispered. He grabbed something from the bathroom counter and pushed her out of the bathroom and back into the spare bedroom.

"I have to go," she whispered back forcefully.

Through the partially open bedroom door, Rachel watched as the front door of the suite opened inward. "Turn down service," the maid called again.

Rachel was galvanized into action. So was her lover.

He pulled her away from the open door and further into the spare bedroom. They were out of sight as long as the maid didn't come in this room. Rachel prayed she'd go into the master bedroom first.

"Red Angel, this is Dark Spirit. Where are you?" Rachel heard the ear bud come to life with Frankie's voice.

Looking out the door, Rachel saw the maid was tidying up in the main suite. If she spoke the maid would hear.

“Red Angel respond.” Frankie’s voice came back a second time with an edge.

The man next to her tensed and squeezed her as if he suspected she wanted to speak.

The maid strolled slowly into the master bedroom but Rachel had to deal with the stranger holding her tight.

Putting her mouth to his ear she whispered, “What is your name? Or do you want me to keep calling you Buccaneer?”

“Colin,” he whispered in an amused tone. “But feel free to use either when you scream in climax.”

A perturbed sigh escaped. “Very funny, Colin. In less than ten minutes I have to be on the third floor of this hotel to perform an important task.”

He exhaled a long sigh. “You won’t make it. The maid can’t see us. No witnesses.”

Rachel closed her eyes in frustration. What had she been thinking in coming up here with him? Lust, that’s what.

She pushed out a deep sigh. “Then I have to report in.”

“Go ahead.”

“You can’t listen.”

He slid her a disbelieving look and rolled his eyes. “I promise you I can keep a secret.”

Pressing her lips flat, she moved away from him and headed for the closet.

Once inside relative privacy, Rachel took a deep breath and made the difficult call. “Dark Spirit this is Red Angel. I won’t make...” She paused hating to say the words. “I won’t make it to the designated spot to perform my task.”

Frankie’s voice came back with a concerned edge. “Are you hurt?”

Did a nosebleed and splitting headache count? “Not...” She started to say, “Not exactly,” but changed her mind. “No. I’m not hurt. But if I move, someone will see me. I’ll be caught somewhere I shouldn’t be.”

There was a long pause of pregnant silence at the end of her com link before Frankie said, "Hold on."

"I can pull the fire alarm at the penthouse level in less than five minutes," Rachel offered, hoping to save her skin.

"No!" Frankie fairly shouted in her ear. "Do not pull the penthouse fire alarm. If you can't make it to the third floor in time, I'll have to go with my alternate plan."

"Then go with your alternate plan." *Whatever that was.* Rachel had no doubt Frankie maintained no less than three backup plans for any eventuality just in case of mishaps. She shook her head, realizing she was probably the reason Frankie needed so many back up plans.

"Copy, that. Dark Spirit, out." Frankie's tone, though completely business-like, held a slight edge Rachel noticed immediately. She hated to disappoint Frankie more than she cared what Paul thought of her spy skills. He'd been vocal of what he considered her sincere lack of the aforementioned spy skills since she began the program.

While Paul found fault with almost everything she did, Frankie had always championed her much to Paul's regret. After this failed mission, she'd perhaps lose Frankie's respect too.

Glancing at the door, she visualized the sexy man she'd just had her wicked way with causing the mission failure. She was like a horny guy on the prowl. Why she couldn't resist him was beyond her capacity for understanding.

The closet door swung open and a shaft of ambient light caught her like a deer frozen in headlight beams. Rachel flinched when Colin slid into the space. He frowned and pushed the door closed without making a sound. Three seconds later Rachel heard the maid enter the spare bedroom. She tensed up trying to be invisible and silent, willing the maid not to look in the closet for any reason.

The small window above her head afforded a shaft of moonlight, but not enough to see where Colin stood.

Waiting in the dark was not something Rachel enjoyed. Her mind wandered to the inevitable castigation she'd endure once she checked in at Protocol headquarters. She already dreaded the debriefing and tried to think up a plausible excuse for her actions.

Lust certainly wasn't an acceptable reason for failure.

Her insatiable hunger for Colin was going to get her fired. The annoying thing was that the primary thought pulsing through the pain in her temples was the location and time of when she could meet him again.

Would she ever see him again when Paul Kelly excused her from the Protocol team for failing to do one simple task? It was unlikely. Heart pounding in her chest, she drifted silently forward a step to find him in the dark. One last hug. One last kiss. If she was going to be fired anyway, she should grab all of Colin that she could.

Rachel raised her arms and took another step toward where she thought the closet door was located. She took another. The third step yielded her hands against his muscular torso.

The sound of clothing rustling stopped her. His hand managed to slide around her waist without effort. He pulled her close. She rubbed his chest with one hand before promptly sending it around his neck to play with the hair at the nape of his neck.

A shudder ran through him when she grazed his scalp lightly with her fingernails. She suspected if she placed a hand on his cock, it would be hard. She vibrated at the memory of their earlier tryst. Her blood pounded through her veins as his scent wrapped around her libido. The one time with him hadn't been enough to quench the lusty inferno between her legs.

Rachel wanted him again, but knew a fire alarm was about to ring. A task she was supposed to have completed for her part tonight. She'd failed. This mission would not be counted a success by any measure, with the exception of a sexual one.

Paul would not be pleased and she dreaded the coming confrontation. She tried to muster the energy to care. Why did her spy career seem so unimportant when she relaxed in Colin's arms?

The fire alarm rang. She jerked even though she'd been expecting the noise. Colin rubbed his hand down her back in what she assumed was a calming gesture. It was working.

The maid shrieked at the sound of the alarm and ran out of the spare room then out of the hotel suite's front door slamming it behind her.

Colin shifted his hands together and the face of his watch lit up. "I hope it isn't a real fire. The alarm is early."

“It’s not a real fire. I was supposed to pull the alarm. I just called to tell my partner I was trapped and unable to get to the third floor.”

He was silent for a moment. He kissed her forehead. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to get you in trouble.”

“It was my fault. Lust overcame me.”

“Me too.” He pulled her into his arms and found her mouth for a kiss. He rubbed his lips over hers and dipped his tongue in her mouth for a taste. Her hunger for him pushed through her veins. The heady taste of him made her forget everything else.

She tightened her arms around his neck as the steady ring of the fire alarm vibrated in her chest. The sound made her want to run, but it was better that they waited a few moments. They wanted to ensure no one from the penthouse level would see them leave. And she didn’t want to break the decadent kiss.

After several lip-licking moments they finally parted and padded silently out of the closet and through the suite.

Once out in the hall, Colin headed for the door labeled ‘roof access’ and stopped when she didn’t follow.

Turning around he asked, “Do you want to come with me? I think we’re working on the same team tonight.” His grin almost made her throw caution out the window, but she was in enough trouble.

Rachel shook her head. “It was great ‘working’ with you, but I don’t want to deviate from my mission parameters. At least any further than I have already.”

He nodded and pulled her close. Dipping his head to capture her lips in a sensual kiss, she concentrated on keeping her legs from buckling. Their passionate embrace would have to last her for an undetermined time. Rachel hoped this wouldn’t be the last time she ever saw him.

Colin grabbed her hand and pressed a thumb drive into her palm. “If you hadn’t had a nosebleed, we wouldn’t have retrieved it anyway.”

Rachel looked at the flash drive then back at Colin.

“It probably has some juicy information known only to Salerno. Maybe you can use it as a bargaining chip so they won’t punish you.”

“Thank you.” An unexpected gift. There would still be the devil to pay, but perhaps Colin had given her the means to ante up the fee.

He winked. "I'll see you soon."

"I hope so."

"I know so." He grinned and disappeared through the door to the roof.

Rachel shuffled to the stairs. She had a long way to go and a lot of explaining to do once she got there. After scurrying down the first four flights, she tried not to think of it as her final descent into Hell.

* * * *

Paul Kelly wiped his hand down his face in a familiar gesture of fury when he found out the complete truth of what happened in the Las Vegas hotel. Rachel and Frankie sat before his desk, solemn faced and quiet.

Frankie had already given him one account before they'd arrived. It was a cryptic one, however, and did not explain much regarding Rachel's inability to perform her task. It also hadn't explained her call five minutes before her task was to be completed to explain her imminent failure.

Upon her return to base, Rachel had told him about seeing the man she'd released in Columbia and her impulsive action to help him secure entrance to the penthouse. She'd apologized and explained why she couldn't get back out because of the maid.

Paul crossed his arms. "What were you doing on the eighth floor at the party in the first place?"

"Waiting around for the appointed time to pull the fire alarm on the third floor." Frankie had already explained to him briefly that she'd sent Rachel in there as back up for Ken's agents. Paul wondered if she would rat Frankie out to save her own skin if he pressed her further.

"How did you get into the party in the first place? It was supposed to be by invitation only." He pierced her with his most ferocious glare and raised an eyebrow for an extra menacing expression.

Rachel's face softened as if he didn't scare her one single bit. "I guess a pretty face and a smile buys more than you think."

Next to her, Frankie sat with her spine rigid and added, "I'm sorry, Mr. Kelly. I was the one that suggested she circulate through the party area so as to be

available to the others on the mission. I didn't know she already knew one of the agents."

Paul ignored Frankie's repeated statement and studied Rachel. She was hiding something. Her unease circulated in the room like a presence. "Why did it take you so long to get out of the room once you had retrieved the item from inside the safe? You should have had plenty of time to get to the third floor."

A sharply surprised glare was shot his way before she could conceal it. "I don't know what you mean?"

"Then let me explain." Paul twisted and grabbed a sheaf of papers from the in-box, which rested on the corner of his desk. "I have the computer access records from the hotel telling me the exact time you entered and exited the penthouse suite."

Her face turned crimson and her lips flattened suggesting she wasn't going to answer. *Jesus*, now what, he thought.

Gaze focused straight ahead, she shifted in her chair as if suddenly uncomfortable, but didn't respond.

He prodded. "I also show that three minutes after entering the room, the other agent accessed the safe in the spare bedroom closet. Two and a half minutes after opening it with the combination, he sealed it."

"So?" Rachel slid a surly look his way momentarily and then resumed staring at the wall.

"So from the time the safe was sealed shut again and the maid accessed the room to turn down the sheets is a lapse of quite a bit of time I'd like accounted for!" The final word out of his mouth was a piercing shout.

She inhaled deeply and exhaled before answering. "I got a nosebleed and the other agent helped me into the bathroom to stop it."

Frankie snapped her head sideways to stare at her wayward partner. Paul was also stricken for a moment. "Nosebleed? Why did you get a nosebleed?" Without waiting for her to answer, he turned, pushed a button on the desk intercom and called for a Protocol scientist to come to his office.

"I don't know why the nosebleed came about, but Colin grabbed for a towel and this came flying out from the folds." She held out her hand and dropped a flash drive in his palm.

“Did you have a sharp sudden headache right before the nosebleed?” he asked studying the small silver thumb drive in his hand.

“How did you know that?” Rachel’s eyes narrowed. She sent him a worried gaze of inquiry.

“Christ.” Paul ran his hand down his face again.

Rachel had failed the minimum standard Protocol limits of field work during her first month in the program. All the other agents could last for a minimum of two weeks before the strain showed. Rachel could barely last through a twenty-four hour period before something happened. The son of a bitch Senator Bremer, who forced him to keep Rachel in the program, didn’t care if she didn’t belong in the exclusive little group.

A knock at the door prevented him from answering her question. “Come in,” he barked.

A stocky, balding scientist in a white lab coat entered his office. His questioning facial expression landed on Paul.

“Miss Miles had a headache followed by a nosebleed during her last mission. I want to know why.”

Concern registered over the scientist’s features. “Yes, sir,” he replied. “I’ll run a battery of tests straight away.”

Paul nodded at Rachel once. “Go with him. You need to be evaluated.”

“But—”

“But nothing. You’re sick. Go get checked out. We’ll chat later.” She hesitated, so he added, “Look at it this way, it’ll give you more time to think up an excuse.”

Rachel shot a frown over one shoulder, but exited without saying anything else. The scientist followed her out the door leaving Paul with a worried Frankie.

“She got a nosebleed within the twenty-four hour window? That’s not good.” Frankie’s quiet southern lilt reverberated around the office.

Paul forced a breath out. It was a sigh of relief to cover his anxiety. “Relax. It was only the first one. She’ll be fine.”

Frankie’s rigid spine said she wasn’t relieved. Paul wasn’t either but didn’t show it.

“What’s the fall out from our mission ‘challenges’ this time?” Frankie eyed the thumb drive in his hand briefly.

Paul sighed. “The agent from the other task force got caught on tape pulling the alarm in the kitchen. I’d hoped you could at least scramble the picture if not turn it off.”

Frankie shrugged and shook her head. “I just didn’t have time to turn it off. I’m sorry.”

Paul grimaced. “The local cops are screaming for blood from the other group we worked with.” Federal case or not. Secret mission or not. Stopping evil criminals or not. The local police wanted a scapegoat. Paul didn’t have one to give them.

Well, technically he had one, but he refused to turn Rachel over to them. Nepotism at the highest level was involved regarding her participation in the Protocol Agency and impossible to overcome in his particular chain of command.

“What can I do?” Frankie asked.

“Nothing for now. Go ahead and write up your full detailed account. I’ll look it over and adjust it for the ‘official’ report we submit to the Senator.”

“If you don’t mind me illegally hacking into the hotel’s communications system, I might be able to tag a virus to the tape of Zack pulling the fire alarm. It’s a long shot, but—”

“Do it,” Paul cut her off without hesitation. “Let me know if you succeed.”

Frankie nodded and stood. Before leaving she turned back. “I’m sorry I sent her into the party. I should have checked—”

“No. It was my fault,” Paul cut her off again. “I knew about the other agent. At the time, I didn’t think it was important to tell you. In the future, we need to keep them apart.”

Frankie nodded again and left his office. As soon as the door closed, the phone on his desk rang.

Glancing at the familiar phone number on the caller ID he grunted. *What now?*

He picked up the phone and added a jovial tone he didn’t feel. “Good afternoon, Senator Bremer. What can I do for you?” Paul flipped the thumb drive Rachel had given him through his fingers like a magician about to perform a coin

trick.

Bremer cleared his throat loudly over the phone. "I want the details of the recent mission you sent your agents on."

Paul rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "As soon as it's complete, I'll send it to you."

"Why isn't it complete? It's been hours. It should be done now." The senator's phlegm-filled smoker's cough assailed the phone line. He pulled the receiver away from one ear until the noise stopped.

Sighing, Paul brought the phone back to speak and decided to fib a little. "One of my agents got hurt."

Another juicy cough erupted over the phone line. "Which one?"

"The one we always discuss." Paul squeezed the drive securing it in his palm and pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. "The one who shouldn't be in the Protocol Agency at all. Rachel should be eliminated from the program and you know it."

Senator Bremer grunted. "She stays. You know why. Make it work with her as a member of your group, or no permanent funding."

Paul didn't give a shit about the permanent funding for the Protocol Agency and especially not more than he cared about Rachel's health. He only let Bremer think that was the reason for his continued acquiescence. If Paul was removed from the project there wouldn't be anyone in authority to watch over and protect Rachel. He refused to allow anything bad to happen to her.

Ignoring the dig about funding, Paul sighed deeply and grated out, "The Protocol program has a negative impact on her health. She should be removed before we injure her."

"Bullshit. You just want her out so I won't have leverage over you any longer. Suck it up. She stays. Send me that report, pronto." Senator Bremer slammed the phone down in Paul's ear.

"Bastard," Paul said out loud to the buzzing dial tone. He studied the silver flash drive again as he placed the phone in its cradle.

After he made a copy of the contents, he'd give this original flash drive to Ken as a token of his regret for getting Zack in trouble with local law enforcement. Then he'd mention the true problem of his agent, Colin, contacting

Rachel during the mission and shift the blame there.

His other Protocol agents were all flawless in performance of their missions. Paul kept Frankie permanently attached to Rachel to keep her in line and alive. Even as unfair as it was for Frankie to partner with an inferior agent, Frankie never complained about Rachel.

Perhaps she understood his unspoken pressures. Maybe she viewed Rachel as a necessary component of her own continued existence in the ultra secret business where they made their living. Rachel's participation being required was, after all, the truth. Senator Bremer made certain of it.

Frankie was the only other protocol agent who knew even a hint of the truth about Rachel and why she was allowed to stay. Regardless of the 'challenges' Rachel created and Frankie faced during each mission they went on together, Frankie stood up for her like a valiant sibling if anything went wrong.

Things didn't always go wrong, but enough that he had to cope, and explain more often than he wished.

Later in the day, Ken Davenport arrived on his doorstep in a full fury to extract a pint of Paul's blood the hard way.

"My agent was compromised." Ken's fists resting on Paul's pristine desk was a formidable enemy to face.

Paul merely smiled, leaned back in his chair and tried the light approach. "I know. I was there."

A vein in Ken's forehead bulged. "What the fuck happened?"

"I haven't received the full report yet." A big lie, because he'd already read the file and altered it to suit himself before submitting it to the senator.

Ken lifted his fists and folded his arms across his chest making him look even more belligerent. "And when you do?"

"I'll give it all the attention it deserves." Paul smiled and leaned back in his chair.

"Not good enough."

Paul pushed his sleeve up. "Would you like a pound of flesh or a pint of blood?"

Ken inhaled deeply as if trying to either make a choice or temper his wrath. It didn't seem to be working. "I'll take both unless you get my agent out of

trouble.”

Paul shrugged and forced a dispassionate expression to register on his face. “It’s already taken care of.”

“Really.” Ken’s voice dripped with disbelief and distain. “How did you manage that?”

“I have connections. Powerful ones. Relax.”

“I want assurances that Zack’s face isn’t now plastered all over every local yokel watch list now.”

“The tape was destroyed and all traces of the film were melted by a nasty virus at the source.” *Thank God Frankie was a computer genius.*

“Send me proof.”

“You’ll have it by the end of the day.”

Ken’s posture deflated slightly and he sat in the chair across from Paul’s desk.

“I understand that Senator Bremer’s people want our departments to work together again. You can understand my reluctance in this.” His eyebrow lifted expressing utter discontent over partnering in the future.

Paul snorted in agreement, but said, “Well, we were successful. You got your bad guy killed without involving any of your agents and his stolen possession is already back in the rightful hands of the family it was stolen from.”

“The cost was too high,” Ken gritted out between clenched teeth.

“There was no cost. I told you. It’s taken care of.”

“It better be. Any more problems on the next mission and I’ll talk to all the powerful people *I know*.”

Paul nodded agreeably. “Noted. Without admitting any fault, I do have a bonus in compensation for your troubles, Ken.”

“Oh yeah? I can’t wait to hear about it.”

Paul opened his desk and pulled out the flash drive he’d received from Rachel. “My agent was miraculously able to retrieve this from a hidden place in Salerno’s hotel suite.”

Ken’s eyes narrowed. “Why were our agents together?”

“Thanks for the segue, Ken. That’s an excellent question and one I also want an answer for.

“Apparently, your agent used mine to help get access to the penthouse after he failed to secure cooperation from Glenda. And for the record, my agent got sick which is why Zack was used to pull the fire alarm.”

“Is that so?” Ken tilted his head and cracked his neck.

“Yes. Perhaps you could ask your agent to stop fucking with mine like I asked you to do before.”

Ken’s brows scrunched in question. “Colin?”

“Yes. He is obsessed with Rachel and it needs to stop.” Paul shot him a glare that would have had any other foe squirming in his chair. Not Ken.

“I don’t understand. How were they able to meet?” Ken leaned forward in his chair relaxing his arms to the sides.

“A miscommunication sent my agent to the party and they saw each other. However, I thought I told you to keep Colin away from her.”

The corners of Ken’s lips curved up slightly in a cynical smile. “No. You told me to keep my agent from looking for her. And I did. The fact that you sent them into the same party is not my fault.” The smile dissolved and Ken’s belligerent attitude came back.

Paul allowed a mirthless smile to shape his lips. “Be that as it may, I suggest you talk to him. Keep Colin away from Rachel or you’ll find out which important people in this town that I’m acquainted with after they crush you.”

Ken smiled genuinely for the first time since entering his office. “I highly doubt that.”

* * * *

Rachel’s bill for paying the devil was due and her boss stood before her ready to collect. The pilfered thumb drive no longer burned a hole in her pocket as Paul had taken it earlier. She’d hoped it would save her.

“What were you thinking?” Paul asked her. She guessed that since she’d passed the earlier scientist’s Protocol test she was fair game again. The nosebleed

confession only bought her a little extra time.

Sitting in the exact same chair in his office, Paul stood between her and his desk. He towered over her, arms crossed and sporting a tight-lipped frown. The only difference was that this time Frankie wasn't here to offer moral support.

Rachel mentally armored herself for a difficult meeting and forced a shrug. "There were complications—"

"You were not where you were supposed to be!" His callous tone was expressed between gritted teeth.

She sat up straighter in the uncomfortable wooden chair. "I had to help another agent up into the penthouse—"

Paul's angry gaze swung to the ceiling before shifting back to her. "You shouldn't have distracted him from his mission in the first place. And by the way, how did you know he was an agent?"

Her mouth opened to speak and then closed abruptly. She didn't know why she instinctively trusted Colin. "I just guessed."

Paul's eyebrows rose practically to his hairline. "And what about Columbia? Did you 'guess' he was an agent then too?"

Rachel's eyes popped open. She'd hoped Paul wouldn't bring up the Colombian mission. "No, I didn't know who he was at first, how could I?"

"You helped him get free from a bad situation in Columbia. You had to have guessed he was in the intelligence community."

She shook her head. "No. I didn't know he was an agent back then."

"Why did you release him if you didn't think he was a fellow agent?" Paul bent at the waist, lowered his face to hers and waited. His breath brushed her cheek. She lowered her gaze to her lap. She longed for Frankie's presence and her unwavering support, but she was on her own this time.

"I thought he was one of Serena Ortega's victims. I was just trying to be humane, given what I knew about her and what she does to men."

Paul straightened to tower over her again and huffed. "So you admit you shouldn't have released him from those handcuffs attached to the bed?"

She gasped and looked into Paul's sardonic gaze. *How did he know that?* Rachel declined to respond. He stared a hole through her waiting for her answer. She didn't want to respond.

Rachel sighed as if deeply affronted. “What makes you think I released him from a bed?”

Paul laughed mirthlessly. “He told us. Besides, I already knew you’d released him. Why did you let him follow you out using your secret escape route?”

“Because the only other way out of the room was blocked. Besides, it was a good thing he came with me. He helped me escape the perimeter of the compound to meet with Frankie in the woods on time.”

Paul’s eyes narrowed. “How?”

“I was almost away when the guard came back unexpectedly. Colin returned and took him out for me.”

“Oh? It’s Colin, is it?” Paul rolled his eyes. “And big deal. You could have handled one single idiot guard all on your own. If Colin hadn’t showed up, you could have taken the guard out in five seconds or less. Hand-to-hand combat is something you’re actually good at.”

Rachel narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips at the back-handed compliment. “Perhaps. But thanks to him I didn’t have to. Besides, he said he had a life or death thing to do.”

Paul’s arms raised to the ceiling as if seeking the heavens for answers. “Which you shouldn’t have cared about.”

Rachel shrugged. “I’ll endeavor to have an apathetic attitude from now on. Is that what you want?”

Arms dropping to his sides abruptly, he sighed. “No. What I want is for you to stay away from him. He isn’t helping your career as a Protocol agent. The Las Vegas mission was compromised because of your failure to complete one simple task.”

Rachel lifted a practiced regretful expression to Paul. “The mission wasn’t a total failure. The goods were secured.”

“With the exception of the other agent being forced to do the single thing you were supposed to accomplish. And he got caught on tape doing it. Rachel, you have made an art form out of breaking mission procedures. It needs to stop. Quit chasing after Colin. I expect you to ignore him next time.”

“I’m allowed a private life. I’ll ‘chase’ whomever I want to on my own

time.”

“Now that is where you’re wrong. You belong to me twenty-four seven. You don’t have time to ‘chase’ anyone, especially not another agent.”

Rachel crossed her arms defiantly and remained silent. The word flashing in her mind wouldn’t be helpful.

“And you wonder why I always have Frankie partnering with you?”

The dig while accurate was painful. Before she could stop it, she sent a willful angry gaze across his desk.

Catching her eye, his only response was a single eyebrow lift in challenge. She knew he hated when she defied his authority.

Rachel would find a way to meet Colin. She’d just have to step up her efforts to hide it. Never seeing him again was an unacceptable option.

Chapter 9

Colin entered the cool confines of the Montgomery Public Library exactly five days after kissing Rachel goodbye in the penthouse suite of a Vegas hotel.

Today he carried flowers to give to Laurie since the last time he was with *her* he'd ditched her in a motel room after their first sexual encounter. He fully expected to pretend that he hadn't fucked her over the back of a chair in the penthouse suite in Las Vegas when she'd been Rachel. He most assuredly wasn't going to mention the hickey he'd put beneath her shoulder blade. A part of him wondered if he'd stepped into a Twilight Zone episode but if he had it didn't matter. He longed to see her.

If he mentioned the Las Vegas mission to Laurie, he knew she'd have a sudden headache and blood would shoot out of her nose. That had to be bad. He'd decided easily not to pressure her faulty memory any longer. There was no need for bloodshed.

Colin didn't understand the phenomenon, but put off the need to solve this particular mystery. He just wanted to see her. Talk with her. Kiss her. Hug her body tight. He missed her. Exhaling the breath he didn't mean to hold, Colin proceeded through the library's lobby.

Searching the front desk area he didn't see her right away and headed to the left to check through the rows and rows of bookshelves housed here.

The telltale squeak of a wheel still in need of oil sounded at the very back corner of the building. Laurie. The beat of his heart sped up at the prospect of just seeing her again. He couldn't wait. At least he hoped it was Laurie. He'd be heartbroken to find anyone else.

He'd gotten a lecture from Ken instructing him that he was no longer allowed to speak to Rachel. Additionally, if they ever saw each other on future missions Colin was to ignore her beyond the confines of the mission task. He'd been required to swear an oath, thankfully not in blood, that he wouldn't engage

her in so much as polite conversation.

Fat fucking chance. He never promised he wouldn't chase after Laurie.

Luckily for him, he knew of this secret alternative way to get to see her, even if it was strange because she wouldn't remember him from Las Vegas. Colin wasn't going to test her any more. He would just enjoy spending time with her.

Rounding the corner to enter the last row of books, Colin internally sighed in relief when he beheld Laurie. Her back was to him, but soon stiffened as if she sensed his presence. Her hair was in the unflattering bun once again. She turned her head around enough to glance at him out of the corner of one eye then turned halfway back to her task. A smile lit her face. He could see it from the side and in the sigh of her shoulders.

After shelving the book in her hand, she twisted her body around to face him.

"Hello," came her sultry whispered voice. His heart pounded in his chest giddy with relief that she didn't seem mad at him.

Colin strode quickly up the aisle. "Hi. I brought you flowers." He wished he didn't sound like such a goofy nerd around her.

"I see. Thank you." He handed her the bouquet making sure to brush her fingertips.

Glancing around Colin uttered the first inane thing he could come up with as conversation. "Are you all alone here tonight?"

She looked around and nodded. "As usual."

Colin stepped close enough to ease into her personal space. "Will you be closing up soon? I'd like to take you out."

A wan smile lit her face and she tilted her head to one side. "Take me out where? Another motel?"

"No." God, she thought he was only here for sex. "I wanted to take you out to dinner." He certainly wouldn't turn sex down if it entered the picture, but he didn't want her to think it was the sole reason for his interest. "Please?"

Her intense gaze shifted to the floor beside them. "I can't be seen with you in town."

Colin smiled. Laurie was hiding from her aunt and he was hiding from the secret chain of command in her other personality's life. *Twilight Zone, here I*

come, he thought with amusement. He justified his forward actions by telling himself he'd promised Ken that he wouldn't engage Rachel.

"I know." Colin leaned in and kissed her cheek. "We can drive back to Millbrook or wherever you want."

"And then what?"

"I don't care what we do." He shrugged. "For right now, just please kiss me."

Her impish grin relaxed him. She slipped her arms around his neck negotiating the flowers to rest against his upper back.

Rising on tiptoes, she pressed her mouth to his in a soft gentle kiss that sent a warm bolt of endearment straight to his heart. He wanted her. He wanted her to want him in return. She held some invisible power over him and he'd never been as comfortable and satisfied with any other woman in his past.

"I've missed you," she murmured. Her breath brushed across his lips. She promptly trailed kisses back and forth across his mouth until he wanted to wrap her up and take her away forever.

"I've missed you more."

"I didn't think you'd come back."

He clutched her tight. "I told you I would."

Laurie kissed his cheek. "So you did."

"I know you want to keep things a secret between us and I'm perfectly content to do that. Just let me see you and we don't have to tell anyone." Colin pulled back to observe her expression as she mulled over his offer.

"Thanks for understanding about my family. Why don't we meet in Millbrook? I told my aunt I was going to the theater to see the Cary Grant movie festival. She knows I'm a fan. Tonight is the last night."

"Perfect. I'd love to go."

"Afterwards, perhaps you could arrange the same motel room. You know, hidden in the back?" A blush stained her cheeks. "Or maybe we could skip the movie this time and go directly to the motel."

"I'd love that as well." Colin leaned in to whisper, "As a matter of fact, I already have a room. It's number one thirty-nine."

The rapid beat of her heart pounded into his chest at the mention of the room number. His cock flared to life in response. The vision of her bent over the chair in Las Vegas slid into his mind. He wondered if Laurie would allow him to create the same memory.

“How much longer until you close up here?” Colin nuzzled her throat and planted a kiss on her neck.

Glancing at her watch, she sighed. “I’m already late. You distract me.”

“I’m surprised Royce isn’t shouting from the front door nagging you to close.”

“Oh, he’ll be here soon if I don’t get moving.” Her face softened. “He implied more than once that *you* might not be back when he stopped by earlier this week.”

Colin narrowed his eyes. “Want me to kick his ass or threaten him if he ever speaks to you again?”

Her laughter washed over him. “No. That won’t be necessary. I’ll simply ignore him. I won’t even tell him you came by.”

“Good thinking. No sense in breaking his heart.”

Her gaze shot up to connect with his. “Are you going to break my heart, Colin?”

“No. I’m hopelessly fascinated by you, Laurie.” And he meant it. Colin hadn’t ever been this captivated by a woman before, let alone one with two distinct personalities. He was smart enough to know she was special, whatever her name was. He planned to pursue Laurie relentlessly. He’d already be in pursuit of Rachel if it wasn’t a detriment to his career.

“I’d better close up.” She shifted away from his grasp. “Let’s skip dinner. I’m not hungry...” she trailed off and gave him a beautiful smile, “...for food that is.”

Colin grinned. “I can’t wait. I’ve been thinking about you for the last several days.”

“Me too.” Her shy smile nearly undid him.

* * * *

Heart beating wildly in her chest, Laurie pulled into the parking lot behind the motel to meet Colin as previously arranged. He'd told her they could go see the Cary Grant film festival, but with their limited time together, she wanted sexual pleasure versus movie entertainment.

Before leaving the library, Laurie had called her aunt to remind her about the movie festival. Voice quivering in anticipation and fear, she told her Aunt Fiona not to wait up. Her aunt reminded her to be home by midnight.

For the first time in her life, Laurie had the urge to tell her aunt she'd be home when she felt like it, but lacked the courage. Aunt Fiona had sacrificed a lot over the last twenty years on Laurie's behalf. She'd become her sole guardian and raised her when her parents had died. She didn't deserve Laurie's anger over where her life was currently headed.

Her gaze focused on the door to room one thirty-nine and her heart skipped a beat in anticipation. Pushing out a deep breath, she exited her car and ignored the continued feeling of being watched. She glanced around nervously, but didn't see a single soul. It was just her paranoia over the clandestine nature of tonight's activities.

As before, the motel door snatched open before she could knock. Colin grabbed her outstretched hand and pulled her inside the room.

A half second later the cheap door slammed shut and she was pressed against it encased in his muscular embrace. She buried her face in his chest and took a deep breath of his spicy cologne as he rained kisses on her hair.

Colin massaged her back tenderly and soon his lips covered her hungry mouth. She inhaled deeply and with it came his sexy male scent. Her time was limited and with his lazy seductive kiss, he didn't seem to be in any hurry to get naked.

Laurie found some courage and pushed him towards the bed herself. She'd been so worried that she'd never see him again that she wanted to be reckless tonight. Colin seemed content to kiss and hug, but laughed when she pushed him down to the already folded down sheets.

He grabbed her hips and pulled her between his legs. "What's your hurry, darlin'?"

She smiled and brushed her hand down his face. "That's the first thing you

ever said to me.”

“I remember.” He smiled and narrowed his focus. “You never told me why were you running that day?”

“Later. My time is limited.” She kissed his upturned mouth.

“Why limited?”

She shrugged. “I told my aunt I’d be home by midnight.”

“Midnight?” A sudden grin split his face. “How can you get an overnight pass?”

Laurie barked out a laugh. “All night? Probably never.” He opened his mouth to speak but she placed her fingertips over his lips. “Sex now, explanations later.”

“Deal.” He touched his mouth to hers lightly. Trailing kisses along her jaw, he whispered in her ear, “So are you in the mood to try something different?”

“Like what?” Laurie wanted sex. She wanted to feel his hands on her. She wanted him to penetrate her hard and bring her to orgasmic heights like before.

“I’d like to bend you over and take you from behind.”

Heat crept up her cheeks. Her experience was seriously lacking. She straightened. “I don’t think I’d like that.” Her heart pounded a sharp thudding cadence at the mere thought of his suggestion. Bent over? Sex from behind? How could she?

“I think you’d love it. Want to give it a whirl?” He squeezed her once, kissed her torso through her blouse and lifted his gaze to hers. His hands slid from her hips to the base of her spine.

She tensed up in his arms. “I...I don’t think so.”

“Okay. We don’t have to.” He stroked her back lightly. “Will you tell me why not?”

Whispering miserably, “I’m afraid.” She should have known she was out of her league. He was far more experienced.

“I promise I will never hurt you.” Colin pulled her close. “Let me explain first and then if you’d like to try it, we can.”

“And if not, you won’t ever want to see me again?” Laurie closed her eyes tight to keep her tears from threatening to fall. She backed out of his embrace

several steps.

He stood from the bed and followed her. Placing his hands on her head, he tilted her face toward his and stroked his thumbs along her jaw. "I'm not that kind of guy. Sex is supposed to be fun, for both of us. I'd never make you do anything you didn't want."

Laurie fixed her gaze on his beautiful chocolaty eyes. "Okay. I'm sorry. I guess my supreme sexual ignorance and inexperience is showing."

He grinned. "You know what they say? The easiest way to get experience is to try new things."

Scrunching her brows in question she asked, "Oh? Who says that?"

His bark of laughter caught her off guard. "Okay, you got me. Maybe I'm the only one who says that. Tell you what. Let's take it slow and easy. We can try something new next time."

Laurie tightened her grip on his waist to keep him pressed up against her body. Would there ever be a next time? "I don't want you to lose interest or be disappointed."

"I won't be. Trust me, I'm interested. Come here." He led her back to the bed. It was unlikely he'd lose interest regardless of what happened between them or what he said to placate her.

She slid her arms around his neck once they reached the bed. "Show me what you have in mind." Laurie decided she'd rather do something thrilling in case this was the last time she ever saw him. She decided quickly that she wanted to try something new and dangerously sexy. She'd save any regrets for later.

He glanced down at her breasts, caressing them with a hungry stare as his gravelly voice whispered, "Turn around."

Laurie turned. Colin pressed his chest close to her back and slipped his arms around her body. She flinched as he slid his hands over her breasts thumbing the nipples through her blouse until she squirmed in his embrace.

As she writhed, his lips brushed a tender path along her neck and down her shoulder. He trailed kisses to the center of her back lingering below one shoulder blade. Pausing momentarily, Colin took a deep breath as if to cleanse his lungs. He soon straightened and hooked his chin over one shoulder to whisper, "If we were undressed..." he paused and his hips, including a very impressive erection, nudged against her butt, "I'd bend you over and shove my cock all the

way inside of your sweet, wet pussy.”

Laurie sucked in a sharp breath at the sexy visual even as she felt a blush creep across her cheeks at his crude words. Colin thrust his hips against her rhythmically in mock sex.

“Does that turn you on? My cock’s about to burst from wanting to fuck you so desperately.” He pinched her nipples and she soaked her core. Perhaps trying something new wouldn’t be so scary after all. Laurie couldn’t think past having him inside her body.

The memory of his thighs pressing against her as his wide shaft had entered her body for the first time flashed in her brain. She wanted him.

“Please,” Laurie whispered.

“Please what?”

“Take me from behind. I think perhaps I will like it.”

He squeezed her body almost as if trying to control himself and chuckled. “You will. I promise.” He nuzzled her neck and whispered, “But I’ll stop if you change your mind. Just tell me to stop and I will, I promise.”

She nodded. “I trust you.”

“Undress for me.” He grinned as if he expected her to balk.

Laurie paused only a few seconds before she removed her blouse pulling it over her head. Her bra soon followed along with the rest of her clothing in a pile on the floor. Colin disrobed as she did until they were both completely naked. The very idea of being nude in front of a man gave her a prurient thrill.

He gave her nude body an appreciative appraisal from head to toes then pushed her to the bed and followed behind her. The warm, masculine, large presence of his body behind her made the muscles in her core contract with desire.

Bending at the waist she placed her hands on the sheets. “I’m sorry I don’t know much.”

“I’m not sorry about that at all. It just means I can teach you things.” Fingertips grazed her hips and another gush of wetness coated her insides. Inhaling deeply to control her staccato heart beat, she sighed slowly and murmured, “Okay. I’ve always been a good student.”

Colin positioned her body on the edge of the bed. Bent at the waist, her

weight balanced on her elbows. He placed her hands flat on the sheets. Sliding close behind, he pressed his naked length along her body.

“Now I can reach your breasts.” He squeezed each one in his palm. “And my other favorite part of your body.” One hand lowered and brushed past her pubic bone. Laurie jumped when he rubbed her clitoris once.

His erection throbbed against her butt and a shot of moisture trickled out to cover his waiting fingertips as the wonderful possibilities of this position registered on her undereducated libido. He shifted, sliding the muscular fronts of his firm thighs against the back of her legs. The sensation was heady. His erection slipped between her legs and the warm invasion sent a shiver across her body.

“You like that?” He pinched her nipple gently and stroked her clit again while his shaft began moving across her now very soaked lower lips.

A moan escaped her even as her breathing increased. The sensation of his hard length between her legs while his hands worked at her breast and clitoris were fast leading her to the ragged edge of orgasm.

Laurie dipped at the knees and her hips shot back as his dick caressed her drenched opening. Her sudden movement allowed for his cock to enter her slightly. Colin groaned and backed up releasing the exquisite and pleasurable sensations.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped.

“Holy shit, that felt great, but I need to put a condom on darlin’.”

Condom? Good Lord, she could never seem to remember that important step in this seductive process. No wonder girls got into trouble. Sex was intoxicating. Laurie couldn’t think past finding satisfaction. An entirely new perspective on lovemaking was revealed to her after being with Colin. He made her forget absolutely everything else when they were together.

Colin stepped away from her, reached for his wallet resting on the night stand and extracted a foil packet from the fold.

Snapping the latex in place he again approached her bent form. She hadn’t moved. She hadn’t even been breathing.

He slid his body back to exactly where he’d been before and resumed his tactile exploration of the most sensitive parts of her anatomy. He grabbed both breasts. Laurie glanced down and watched his tan hands massage her pale flesh. His thumb and forefinger soon pinched her swollen peaks sending shards of desire

gushing her insides.

His cock rubbed between her legs sending showers of electric pulsing sensation up her core. He rubbed his length across her lower lips but didn't enter this time. The friction of the movement almost connected with her clitoris, but not quite.

"You have a couple of choices for this position," Colin whispered against her ear. "We can stay here on our feet bent over the bed, we can crawl up on the bed on hands and knees or we can move to the side chair at the end of the bed. Lady's choice."

Laurie could barely think let alone make choices. "Let's stay here. Please..."

"Good choice." He pressed warm kisses along the back of her neck adding another layer of stimulation. He played with her breasts, rolled and pinched her nipples and then he lowered one hand down her body to slip between her legs. It was the single most erotic action she'd ever witnessed. Watching him as he stroked her clitoris and pinched her nipple sent her breathing into erratic pants. His manual stimulation elicited multiple electric vibrations throughout her oversensitive body.

A low moan of appreciation centered deeply in her throat escaped before she could stop it. She was so close to a climax that she trembled with need.

"Are you ready for me, darlin'?"

"Yes." Before she even finished her one syllable response his shaft slid inside her wet body piercing her to the hilt. The full sensation of him inside drove her to the pinnacle of release. He pumped his cock twice more and she fell over the edge of orgasmic oblivion. She screamed his name and climaxed as he continued to pump in and out of her body.

Legs trembling, Laurie barely stayed on her feet as Colin powered his cock in and out of her satisfied body. Core clenching with each thrust, he touched a blissful spot each time he pushed all the way inside. It was like a mini climax each time the tip of his shaft hit her womb. She heard moans of ecstasy and realized she was the one emitting them.

Colin's hands slid to her hips to leverage a deeper and more powerful connection. Two seconds later, he thrust deeper than ever as a resonating growl punctuated his final thrust. He paused, completely embedded for a moment, squeezing her hips as a shudder ran through him. The vibration shook her body

too.

Gasping, he pushed her to the bed and fell loosely on top of her pinning her down. She gratefully sank forward into the sheets and tried to catch her breath.

“What did you think of the new position?” he whispered in her ear. He was panting lightly.

“I thought it was phenomenal.”

“I agree. Let me catch my breath and we can discuss a few more options.” Colin’s fingertips skimmed along the side of her body from shoulder to knees. He tickled her back and did a steady figure eight pattern around her shoulder blades and lightly touched the hickey he had given Rachel in Vegas.

“Okay.”

Several moments passed before he said, “Let’s get under the covers.” He disengaged from her slowly and walked to the bathroom. She didn’t move from where she rested.

He returned and rubbed her back. “Come on. Get into bed with me and we can talk.”

“Talk?” Laurie lifted her head and smiled. He helped her up, kissed her mouth once and led her between the sheets cuddling up close once they were ensconced in the soft bed.

She glanced at the bedside clock to keep note of the time. She had about another hour to do whatever she wished before she’d have to leave to make it home on time.

Colin propped one hand against his head and threw the other around her middle. “Tell me something about you. Something I don’t know.”

Laurie turned to him. “Like what?”

He grinned. “Where did you grow up?”

“Here. My parents died when I was little. I don’t remember them. My aunt raised me. She gave up lots of things to take care of me, so I want to take care of her now that she is getting on in years.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” He stroked fingertips along her waist and hip.

Laurie took a deep breath. “Royce thinks I should get my own life and not

worry about what my aunt thinks.”

He narrowed his lids and frowned. “Personally, I don’t think you should care what Royce thinks anymore.”

“You sound like my aunt.” She reached up to smooth the frown from his brow. “I’m not sure what she would think of you.”

“She’ll love me. All the female relatives of my previous...um...*dates* have adored me. I’m not exactly sure why.”

Laurie laughed, and for the first time since she’d entered the motel room, she relaxed. “It’s because you look like a bad boy all sinful and decadent. Don’t you know all women think a reformed bad boy makes the best catch?”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I’m not a bad boy.”

She laughed. “Aren’t you? Well, you look like one.”

“Looks can be deceiving.” He stroked her thigh sending a riotous shiver of goose bumps all the way to her hip bone.

“So tell me about the police station. You know, that day we first met. Why were you there?”

She laughed mirthlessly and shook her head. She shouldn’t tell him, but the desire to confide in someone, anyone, overrode her reluctance.

“I had a nightmare, one that seemed so real I couldn’t shake it.”

His brows creased as if concerned. “A bad dream sent you to the police? Must have been pretty bad.”

“The dream alone didn’t send me. It was the missing time that went with it.”

His eyes widened. “Missing time. Like a blackout?”

Laurie nodded solemnly. “And no one around me seemed to have missed me, but three days were gone. Poof. It freaked me out.”

“So you went to the police?” He prompted her with his sincere expression. “Why?”

Laurie sighed unsure she should spill everything. But what the heck? He probably wouldn’t believe her either. “Because of the newspaper article about the dead guy.”

“Dead guy?” He squinted in obvious confusion.

Laurie turned towards him to explain. “There was an article on the front page of the paper the next morning after I ‘woke up’. It was about a man who’d been killed mysteriously at his office the night before after work. He was shot.

“In my dream I struggled with a man over a gun and he also ended up getting shot. The shirt I was wearing in the dream got blood on it.

“Then I woke up after three days with no knowledge of where I’d been and found the same shirt in my closet. Then there’s this dead guy on the front page of the paper. Like I said, it disturbed me enough to take action.”

Laurie expected his face to be filled with disbelief, but he surprised her. He nodded as if her wild explanation was plausible. “Do you still have the shirt?”

“No. After I got back from the police station it was gone. Maybe I dreamed it up too.

“When you first showed up, I thought since I’d seen you in the police station that you tracked me to put me in jail.”

He shook his head. “I was just visiting my cousin. Then this blonde babe tackled me.”

She smiled. “I didn’t tackle you, I fell on you.”

“Ultimately, it’s the same difference. After I got back from my last assignment overseas, I did track you down.” He leaned closer. “But for purely personal reasons, not to arrest you.”

“Do you think it’s possible that I killed that man in my blackout?”

Colin’s eyebrows rose as if he pondered the possibility. “I doubt it. However, I have a connection at the local police station. I could make some discrete inquiries, if you’d like.”

Her eyes widened as panic flowed freely. “What if I killed him?”

“What if you didn’t and you’ve been worried for nothing all this time. I can see if the case was ever solved and I won’t even need to use your name.”

He had a point. She’d never even once considered she was innocent. She’d stuffed the disturbing memory on a back burner and ignored it. “All right, if my name isn’t used. It would be a relief to find out that I wasn’t involved.”

“Consider it done.” He stroked a hand down her body distractedly. “So

have you had any other blackouts since then?"

She nodded. The memory of the most vivid one made heat creep up her cheeks.

"You're blushing. What else happened?"

"I dreamed about...you."

He grinned. "Really? Tell me. What did you dream about me?"

She thought her face might explode with the heat radiating off her cheeks. "It was wicked."

His grin went wider. "More wicked than what happened tonight?" He wagged his eyebrows.

Laurie shrugged and smiled in satisfied memory. "Your head was between my legs. You were licking me." Whispering the information didn't alleviate her embarrassment.

His grin remained but he shrugged. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, Laurie."

"I know. But in the dream you were handcuffed to a bed." Laurie closed her eyes and buried her face in his shoulder so she wouldn't have to see his expression.

Colin cleared his throat and massaged the back of her neck.

"So do you want to try out handcuffs next time?"

"No," she said sharply and pulled away. Was he horrified? She couldn't read his impassive expression but he didn't seem angry. "Unless you want to."

Colin grinned again. "I don't usually go for bondage games, but I'm willing to try it, if you want to."

"No." She shook her head to solidify her answer.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded vigorously. "I'm sure." *But was she?*

Laurie had woken that next morning to the sound of blood rushing in her ears from the power of her thudding heart directed by that carnal dream. The excitement at the mere prospect of what it implied had left a potent ache between her legs from unsatisfied longing. She'd been left so wet and aroused afterwards

that she'd slipped her hand down to stroke herself and relieve the throbbing pressure.

Colin's hand touched her face. A thumb stroked her jaw. "You don't have to be afraid to tell me what you want. What is your desire?"

Laurie was certain her face would melt off from embarrassment, but longing overrode her shyness. "Will you...um...lick me?" Her eyes darted down to convey where she wanted his tongue.

"I'd be delighted." He leaned forward and kissed her first dipping his tongue inside for a quick exploration. His fingers found her breast and teased the nipple until it pebbled.

Colin kissed a slow wet path down her body and buried his face between her legs. His tongue licked a wide path along her seam. He lapped up the moisture and moaned. "You taste so good." The tip of his tongue tickled her clit teasing her with pleasure.

Laurie was about to burst. She slid her fingers into his hair to direct his mouth to latch on and suck. His lips wrapped around her clit as if he'd read her mind. Powerful sensations from his mouth forced her back arching off the bed. When he sucked the nub into his mouth she vibrated on the verge of a powerful climax.

He stopped sucking on her clitoris and resumed licking the moisture from her drenched opening.

"Please." She groaned in frustration and grabbed two fistfuls of his hair to guide him.

His tongue delved deeply between her lower lips entering her in simulated sex. Seconds later he licked his way back to her clit and rubbed the tip of his tongue against her until she climaxed, screaming.

Colin kissed his way back up her shivering body. He stopped to take a nipple in his mouth and sucked on it tenderly before trailing his mouth to her neck.

The hard length of his arousal rested against one hip. "Will you get on top of me? I love the feel of your body completely pressed over mine."

"Sure."

He reached over to the nightstand. Pulling open the top drawer, he

fumbled around before retrieving another foil packet. Laurie turned her head to watch and noticed his gun and holster next to his badge before he closed the drawer. The sight of the gun alarmed her for a second, until she was distracted by watching him secure another condom over his wide erection.

He whispered, "I love the look of wonder on your face when you look at my cock."

Laurie grinned and he slid down to rest on top of her. Colin grabbed both of her hands in his and laced their fingers together. He pressed her hands above her head and kissed her mouth sensuously. The musky scent of her own arousal on his lips as he kissed her sent an electric pulse pounding through her veins.

"Open your legs for me," he whispered between kisses.

She spread her knees apart widening her thighs until his shaft rested between her legs. He thrust forward piercing her core as his tongue mimicked the movement below. His pace was slow and tender and she found she preferred the harder, faster rhythm from before.

Breaking his kiss she whispered, "Please, go deeper?"

He groaned and captured her mouth in a long kiss as his hips responded in kind to her ardent request. She squeezed his fingers in hers and lifted her hips to meet his thrusts.

Hands, mouths, hips, legs all worked together to create the most pleasurable bliss imaginable. Laurie felt another climax coming. She couldn't help it. She lifted her hips to meet his thrust and came moaning into his mouth. Two strokes later, Colin crushed her fingers in his and slammed inside her body. He shuddered and collapsed on her. His fast, hard breathing tickled her skin.

After several minutes, and still buried deeply inside her body, Colin started kissing her neck and shoulders as he whispered, "You're amazing," over and over. Her spent body demanded a nap and she closed her eyes for a brief rest.

Laurie dozed off with Colin pressing kisses to her collarbone. She woke up moments later to someone pounding on the door.

She shot up in the strange bed slightly disoriented for a second, but calmed down when she recognized the motel room. Colin lifted his head when she moved, opening his eyes briefly and seeing her smile he settled again.

Putting a hand to her chest and releasing a big sigh, she glanced down at Colin's tousled hair resting on the pillow next to her. She couldn't believe she'd

fallen asleep so soon after making love the last time.

The loud knocking came again rattling the door in its frame. She turned toward the noise as Colin stirred awake beside her. Glancing toward the door, she caught the big red digital numbers glowing by the bedside nightstand.

Laurie blinked once. Panicked alarm grew once the numbers on the clock registered in her brain.

No. It couldn't be. The clock was obviously wrong.

She shrieked in horror when she noticed Colin's watch also displayed the exact same time. Two thirty-four!

Oh God. She was late. Really late.

The next sound was a groan from Colin lifting his torso to his elbows beside her. His action was followed a split second later by the splintering of wood from the cheap motel room door as it was kicked inward.

Gun drawn above the flashlight he wielded and shined in her panicked face, Royce shouldered the door the rest of the way open and stepped inside the motel room sporting a deadly expression.

Chapter 10

Colin raised up in time to see Royce enter the motel room and kick the now broken door shut with one foot.

“Are you okay, Laurie? I heard you scream. Did he hurt you?” Royce growled his questions and advanced closer to the bed. Gun drawn, he pointed the barrel at Colin’s head.

“Put your gun away and douse that fuckin’ light.” Colin put a hand up to shield his eyes from the narrow beam piercing his retinas. If this was the sort of headache Laurie experienced before a nosebleed ensued, he’d be even more sympathetic from now on.

“What are you doing here, Royce?” Laurie’s quivering voice penetrated his pain.

The radio on Royce’s hip crackled to life and distracted him. Colin reached across Laurie for his gun in the drawer next to the bed until Royce moved closer and said, “Don’t even think about it. Laurie, you’re coming with me.”

“No. She’s not.” Colin moved his hand away from his gun. “I’m a federal officer. You’ve already seen my badge. You better have a good reason for breaking in here.” Colin’s petulant tone was uncharacteristic, but he hated being burst in on. He imagined Laurie was mortified. “And another thing, you’re paying for the damn door.”

Laurie gathered the sheet higher until it covered her neck. She trembled as she whispered, “Royce, please step outside?”

“You heard her. Wait outside.” Colin slid out from under the covers and snagged his jeans from the floor. “You had no right to burst in here in the first damn place.”

Royce huffed. “We’ll see about that.”

Colin pulled his jeans on, zipped them and came around the end of the bed

to stand in front of Laurie shielding her from Royce's curious view. He was pissed after so little sleep. Not to mention that Royce's presence in his room was intolerable.

Royce's eyes darted up and down her obviously naked body beneath the sheets several times before he lowered the weapon and stuck it in his holster. The flashlight remained trained on the bed and his eyes remained transfixed on Laurie's body.

"Stop staring at her or I'll rip the eyeballs out of your skull." Colin wanted to growl and punch the smug look off of his face.

Royce shifted his gaze to Colin and huffed once before sending a stern glare back to Laurie. "Hurry up and get dressed."

Laurie's fists tightened on the sheet edge. "I will not."

"Do you know the trouble you've caused with this stunt? I'm taking you home. No arguments."

"Get out, Royce." Fury raced through his veins like poison compelling Colin to answer for her. "Her personal life is none of your business."

"It is when I get desperate late night calls from her Aunt Fiona sending me out to look for her because she's not home when she was supposed to be."

Laurie sucked in a surprised breath. "She called you?"

Royce crossed his arms. "She was crying so hard she could hardly catch her breath."

Laurie gasped, lowered her face and sniffed as tears spilled down her cheeks.

From behind him, Laurie's tearful voice asked, "What did you tell her, Royce?"

"I didn't tell her that I suspected you were at a sleazy out of town motel with a stranger." Royce leveled an angry look at Colin. "But I can call her right now."

"No." Laurie almost dropped her sheet.

"Stop it." Colin advanced a step. "I mean it. Get out."

Royce didn't flinch. After a few seconds of tense staring he lowered his gaze and turned to leave. "I'll wait right outside the door. Don't take too long."

As soon as the door closed, Laurie slid out of bed and frantically searched for her clothing. Colin snapped on the bedside light and helped her pick them up.

He placed a hand on her bare shoulder. "I'll drive you back home—"

Laurie jerked away cutting him off with a sharply whispered, "No!"

Colin released a deep breath. Hooking his thumbs in his front pockets, he tried to calm down. "Are you really going off with him?"

Flitting around the room like a dragonfly on speed, Laurie had pulled her clothes on in a flash. She grabbed her purse and finally paused long enough to give him a regretful gaze.

"No. I'm not going 'off' with him. I'm getting in my own car to drive home. I'm three hours late. My aunt is upset." She broke the stare they shared and glanced at the broken door. She took a tentative step towards the exit and a waiting Royce, but Colin wasn't ready to let her go.

He slung an arm around her waist before she bolted out of his life forever. "When can I see you again?"

She laid her head on his shoulder and whispered, "I don't know." Her hand lifted to his chest and soon traced soft strokes along his collarbone and shoulder.

Colin put a finger under her chin, lifted until he could see her face. He kissed her mouth tenderly. Releasing her lips he said, "I'm sorry we overslept. But I'm not letting you leave with Royce hot on your trail until I know when I can see you again."

"All right." She expelled a breath which brushed across the hair on his chest. "Meet me in exactly a week at the library."

"No. Let's meet tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Her head lifted off his shoulder.

"Yes. My departure flight isn't until the day after and I don't want to sit here all alone. I might get into trouble."

She squinted and a tiny smile lifted one side of her mouth. "Maybe I don't care if you get into trouble."

"Sure you do. Besides you'll miss me."

"I don't know." She tried to pull away but he kept her anchored at his side.

He kissed her forehead. "I have skills you know. I could track you down."

Laurie smiled. "Fine. I'll meet you tomorrow at the library."

"Same time as today?"

She shrugged. "Sure."

"You're going to stand me up, aren't you?" He huffed. "You're probably not even working at the library tomorrow. Royce will greet me and I'll be driven out of town on a rail."

"What a fanciful imagination you have." She moaned quietly when he nuzzled her neck. "It's just hard to get away without a cloud of suspicion. After tonight it'll certainly be worse."

Rubbing her back he kissed her neck again. "It's a date, not a cloud of suspicion."

Another partial smile lifted one side of her mouth. "I'll see you tomorrow afternoon."

"Until then." Kissing her again, Colin released her. The stabbing pain gripping his heart expressed how much he absolutely didn't want to let her go.

For the first time in his life, waking up next to a woman had seemed right and comfortable, not at all awkward. At least not until Royce had burst in and completely ruined the moment. He didn't want to be a problem, but he refused to say good-bye to Laurie.

Perhaps it would be a good idea to track down and find out where Laurie lived in case something, or rather someone, prevented him from seeing her. He also wanted to question Royce privately to find out how long he'd been following them.

After Laurie and Royce had a lively heated argument, Colin stood poised at the door to his room and watched Laurie back out of the parking spot and pull away followed closely by Royce's police car. He narrowed his gaze and debated the merits of following them back to Montgomery.

* * * *

Tears threatened to spill uncontrollably as she exited the motel room.

Laurie was about to lose it. She strangled her guilt-filled emotions and shoved them down refusing to cry another drop in front of either Colin or Royce.

Royce waited on the sidewalk, arms crossed, belligerent expression pressed firmly into the creases of his face.

She noted that his police cruiser blocked her car. A stray notion occurred to her as she prepared for the trip home. "How did you know I was here? Were you following me?"

"I think the better question," Royce stated in a cold tone, "is what you're going to tell your aunt about why you were late. The truth would certainly be unkind." He glanced at Colin now standing in the open doorway of his motel room.

Shirtless, with those sexy jeans caressing his hips, he leaned a bare muscled shoulder against the doorframe to his room and gave her a bone melting half smile. Explanations flew through her mind about what she could tell her aunt, but anything she came up with would require Royce's complicity.

Laurie fought the urge to hang her head. Unfortunately, he was right and telling her aunt the truth would be difficult. It would require more explaining than she wanted to engage in tonight. She pegged Royce with a hopefully heartfelt expression. "Please call her. Tell her I'm okay at least."

He snagged his radio off the belt. "Dispatch, this is Kinston. Call Fiona Miles and tell her I found her niece, Laurie, along the side of state road one forty three sporting a flat tire and a dead cell phone. We're on our way back now."

"Roger that, Royce," a barely understandable voice squawked back.

He secured the radio back on his belt and turned to Laurie. "We'll keep this motel incident just between the two of us."

Colin cleared his throat. "Make that the three of us and you're still going to pay for this door."

Royce turned his head and glared at Colin. "I guess it would be a waste of breath to tell you to stay away from her."

From the doorway Colin nodded once. "You got *that* right."

Laurie was ready to go but her car was trapped in the parking space until Royce moved his car. She crossed her arms wanting some answers. "Tell me, how did you know I was here if you didn't follow me?"

Royce sighed deeply and eyed the ground. "I didn't follow you this time. But I did follow you the last time he was here. When I got the call from your aunt, I played a hunch." The disappointment in his tone set her on edge. She hated that he thought he was allowed any explanation of her affairs, but since he'd just told a whopper of a lie to appease her aunt, she had little to say for now.

"Please move your car so I can go."

Colin didn't say anything else, but he watched her from the doorway until she left the parking lot. She couldn't read his blank expression, but perhaps she had disappointed him.

Silent tears slid down her face as she headed for home with Royce's cruiser hot on her bumper the whole way as if she might make a desperate attempt to flee his jurisdiction.

Royce's lame account about finding her alongside the road with a flat tire was the concocted story they repeated to her aunt again once he escorted her home.

It was no secret that Royce also wanted her undying loyalty for doing so. She wasn't inclined to give it to him since he'd humiliated her so thoroughly at the motel.

Guilt-ridden over worrying her aunt, Laurie spent an hour consoling her and promising endlessly to be more careful in the future about keeping her cell phone charged up. An hour before dawn she climbed into bed. Alone.

During the entire trip from Millbrook to Montgomery, Laurie had thought of nothing else other than Colin's wounded expression when she'd left. Certainly he'd been angry that Royce had burst in wielding a gun like a rogue cop in an action movie. She was touched by his disappointment that she had to leave.

Torn between her growing love for Colin and the need to keep him quiet from her aunt, Laurie wondered what her future love life held. Would she forever have to sneak off to cheap motels to have one? Royce was too involved either way, but she didn't have a choice at the moment.

Lust had made her life complicated but her lovesick heart suffered the most from tonight's fiasco.

* * * *

Much later, Colin slipped under the covers alone. He couldn't get back to sleep. Laurie's scent permeated the sheets and he spent the rest of the darkness sporting a hard on that throbbed with every breath he took. He fell into a troubled slumber around dawn and stayed in bed late the next morning to compensate for the lost sleep.

After a late breakfast in bed, that he wished he were sharing with Laurie, he headed to the Millbrook Police station for a visit with his cousin, Billy.

Entering the front door of the building, he made his way to the stairwell leading to the second floor. He paused briefly on the step where he'd first made Laurie's acquaintance. He shook off the memory as it only made him melancholy and sent up a silent prayer that he'd be able to continue their secret relationship. Laurie was his last best chance for any kind of relationship with either of them for the time being. He didn't want Laurie to end things today when he meet her.

Her other personality, Rachel, crossed his mind on the clandestine drive. Did she have a different address? Surely not.

Colin shook off his memories from the night before and climbed the stairs. He headed towards his cousin's office to see if his favorite relative was in residence. From the door, he saw Billy Hubbard sat at his untidy paper-strewn desk in the center of a room full of other detectives and their messy desks.

He strolled across the room unseen and slid into the chair parked in front of his cousin's desk. "Hey Billy. Are you busy?"

Billy's head shot up in obvious surprise. "Colin? Damn, are you back here again? You must have a woman tucked away somewhere. I know you don't keep coming back here to see little ole me."

Colin grinned and shrugged. "You underrate yourself."

"Oh yeah?" His eyebrows went up. "Then let's go out drinking tonight."

Colin shook his head and laughed. "Sorry, dude, no can do. I got a hot date with my secret woman tonight."

"Ah ha." Billy stood when he did and punched his arm. They shook hands over his desk. "What's her name and does she have a semi-attractive sister? Hell, I'd settle for an ugly one." Billy's laughter rolled across the room.

Colin paused as Rachel popped into his mind but shook his head. "Sorry.

She's an only child. You'll have to find your own ugly date."

"Damn it. Why are you here, besides to torture me?"

"I have a favor to ask."

Billy threw his pencil down onto a pile of paper. "Of course you do."

"It's simple. I just want to look into a possible homicide from a few months ago."

Billy's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why? Do you have new information on one of my cases?"

"No. It's probably nothing. I just want to get some facts straight before I investigate further." Colin hedged.

Billy's eyebrows went straight up towards his receding hairline. "Are you going to pull federal jurisdiction on me?"

"Nope. This is totally informal. Just for me. Cousin to cousin."

Billy shrugged. "Okay."

Together they looked up the newspaper account of the man Laurie might have dreamt about killing. Colin remembered the exact date because it was the day before he'd left for Columbia.

He made a few notes about the case and kicked Billy off his computer and logged into his government account to check on any overlap of federal cases.

An interesting note popped up after peeling back a few layers of security. There was no title on the file. A classified, numbered only case file came up on a short list. Colin knew it was top secret by the sequence of numbers assigned and he had a hunch it was assigned to a certain group headed by Paul Kelly, director of the Protocol Agency and Rachel's boss.

If Rachel had been involved in the case, and he suspected she had, then her memories were showing up in Laurie's dreams. He wondered if that tidbit of information would have an impact on the enforced restraining order they'd saddled him with regarding Rachel.

Laurie reciting her dream of him licking her while handcuffed to a bed had shocked him. She thought it was a product of her own imagination after meeting him at the police station.

Colin mentally rubbed his hands together. He couldn't wait for the next

opportunity to work with the Protocol Agency. He'd ask a few pertinent questions when Mr. Kelly wasn't expecting it. The mystery surrounding Rachel and the Protocol Agency intrigued him.

If he didn't fear more nosebleeds and headaches, he'd ask Rachel about the case. Although if he asked Rachel about a case she remembered from that personality, she shouldn't have any problem. Unless he had to explain how he knew about it from her other personality's bad dreams.

Rolling his shoulders slowly, he shook his head and wondered how far into this Twilight Zone episode he'd be willing to go. Given how attached he'd already become to the both of them, he figured he'd go quite a ways into uncharted territory.

Colin had followed Royce and Laurie back to Montgomery the night before. He knew where she lived, but he hadn't stuck around very long for fear of being caught spying. There was a sense of peace in knowing her permanent address, just in case.

Beyond Rachel's already apparent jealousy, he knew he needed to be cautious about asking her anything regarding Alabama and Laurie's life. While it had been okay to talk with her about Columbia, it was bad news to mention the public library in Montgomery. And he could talk about Alabama with Laurie, but not Las Vegas or Columbia.

Flexing the muscles in his shoulders again from sudden tension, he wondered why any sane man would invite such stress by trying to live two separate lives with two different women.

Crazy.

He logged out of Billy's computer and considered his options. He'd think long and hard before asking either Rachel or Laurie anything specific. The eerie nature of his relationship with each woman made him feel slightly guilty. Like he was cheating.

Colin had always been a one woman at a time kind of guy. Most of his past relationships had been very short due to the erratic nature of his line of work. Disappearing for long periods of time without a word was not conducive to permanent relationships.

Rachel and Laurie each represented aspects of what he considered his perfect woman. Rachel was ambitious, talented, outgoing and sexually adventurous. Plus, she was fun to work with and understood his job obligations

because she, too, was a spy ensconced in his convoluted world of secrets. Meanwhile Laurie was shy, slightly innocent about sex, and readily available for welcome home reunions courtesy of her loving arms. He'd never considered giving up his career for a home life before, but Laurie made the idea more and more appealing.

Most amazing of all, technically they happened to be sharing the same body. So why did he feel like a cheater?

Strolling back into the room, Billy approached the computer desk where Colin sat pondering life and asked, "So, did you find what you were looking for?"

Colin closed the computer down. "Yeah. Thanks. Are you free for lunch?" he asked and stood to stretch.

Billy grinned. "I am if you're buying."

"Fine. Let's go." Colin wished he had someone to confide in about his unusual relationship troubles.

While he loved his cousin, Billy wasn't the kind of guy he could share this dual personality sort of information with. Billy would think it was great. Redneck mentality. Two for the price of one is a good deal. Billy would probably applaud or slap him on the back and say, 'good job, dude'.

Colin was very attracted to both women. It shouldn't be such a problem that they shared the same body.

"Are you sure your secret hot woman doesn't have a sister or a cousin?"

He sighed. "Positive." *She just has multiple personalities.*

* * * *

"Hands in the air, sweetheart." Colin's voice called across the entrance lobby of the library. "I've come to take you in."

Laurie sat at the circulation desk minutes before closing. She paused her card-stamping task to see a grinning Colin approaching the desk. "Where will you take me?" She smiled and played along.

"Anywhere I can get you to go."

She glanced over his shoulder to ensure they were alone. The library was

already empty of patrons tonight. “So did you find anything out?”

“Yep.” He gave her a mischievous smile. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know, for a kiss.”

Tilting her head to one side, she pretended to ponder his demand. “Fine. I guess a kiss isn’t too high a price to pay.”

Colin leaned forward and rested his arms on the desk. He sent her a soulful look. “Everything turn out okay last night once you got home?”

She nodded. For the most part it was all okay. Her aunt was still concerned, but she hadn’t mentioned it this morning. Laurie wasn’t sure what Royce might demand to remain silent. He’d followed her all the way to her house and even accompanied her to her aunt’s porch. She didn’t dwell on his whispered demand. He wanted *future time alone for a discussion*. She had ignored the request as they’d approached her house the night before. She didn’t mention Royce’s intimations to Colin.

“Tell me about the murdered man.”

“According to my source, the going theory is that the guy stayed late to embezzle funds from the company he worked for and under the duress of imminent discovery, he may have simply killed himself.”

Laurie frowned. “Are you sure? Why did the paper say homicide?” The dream had faded from her memory after time, but suicide had never even crossed her mind based on the newspaper account.

He shrugged. “In undetermined cases of suicide the investigation is often handled by homicide until relevant facts are made clear. I know they never questioned any suspects. It’s not an active case any longer so either way, I’d say you’re safe.”

“And the homicide detective didn’t remember me?”

Colin smiled. “He didn’t take your confession seriously since you told him you dreamt it. You didn’t end up in the report that’s on file.”

Laurie closed her eyes and sighed deeply in relief. “Thank you. I appreciate your checking on it.”

“No problem,” he grinned, “But you still owe me a kiss.”

“Do you want this kiss right now?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“Whether I’d get a better reward for my eager willingness to wait until after closing time.”

She glanced at her watch. “That’s not for five more minutes.”

“Will the world stop spinning on its axis if you lock the doors early?”

She giggled. “Probably.”

“Are you going to lock us inside and do wild things to me in the employee’s break room?”

Laurie felt heat rush into her cheeks. There was a leather sofa and a dinette set in the employee’s lounge next to the vending machines. A split visual of using either or both for sex slid into her wicked mind. “You’ve corrupted me,” she whispered before realizing she spoke out loud.

“Regrets?”

She smiled. “None.”

“Lock up. Come on.” He grinned wolfishly. “Let’s take a break.”

“Four minutes.” She’d make him wait until closing time. He came up behind her and clasped his arms around her waist and proceeded to do his best to persuade her to close early.

Kissing the back of her neck, he teased her endlessly with whispered suggestions of what he’d do once they were alone until she locked the doors at just under a minute until the hour.

Laurie led him to the back of the library where the modest break room was tucked away. She could get away with perhaps a fifteen-minute interlude before she’d need to head home without incurring a call to the police station about her whereabouts.

Colin went straight to the sofa and sat on the middle cushion. He motioned her with one hand.

Hands on hips, she lifted a single eyebrow. “You’re getting awfully comfortable. I only owe you a single kiss.”

He grinned. “I just want you to be comfortable, darlin’. Come here and sit on my lap,” he beckoned.

Laurie strolled over to the sofa and stood a moment as if trying to decide

the best course of action. In one fluid move, she lifted a knee and slid it along his outer thigh until they were connected intimately chest to chest. Lifting the hem of her skirt to accommodate the move, she lowered herself to straddle his lap as he'd requested. She dropped her skirt and slid her hands along his chest. His shocked expression told her she'd managed to pull off a bold move for once.

Taking his face in her hands she planted her lips on his and dipped her tongue into his mouth. His growl at her invasion moistened her core. Slipping his arms tightly around her torso, he devoured her mouth until she felt something hard growing beneath her.

The thought that she had such an effect on him excited her. She'd agonized all day over leaving him the night before, afraid she'd never see him again. As his erection grew between them, she vibrated with renewed longing. She ground her clit against his rigid cock and a moan escaped her throat at the electric sensation of the connection. A few more rubs and she'd easily go over the edge of blissful orgasm.

Colin slipped a hand between their bodies to caress her breast. She pressed her hips forward to pleasure herself against his staff. He thumbed her hardening nipple and another rush of wetness centered between her legs. Did she have enough courage to initiate a sexual encounter in the library's break room?

Laurie throbbed from mouth to core with impatient need. Operating under the assumption that each time with Colin was precious and might not be repeated, she made her decision. She wanted sex. She slipped her hands down to his belt and unfastened it. The button popped open on his fly before he disengaged from her lips.

"Are you going to ravish me right here in the break room?"

She giggled. "Are you going to stop me?"

He tilted his head back and laughed out loud. "Not likely."

Hands securely fastened to her hips, he pulled her close against the bulge straining his pants. "Feel that?"

She nodded.

"You do that to me every single time I see you."

For her response, Laurie rolled her hips to rub against his cock. She was on the verge of climax.

“You’re beautiful, even more so when you’re about to come. Let me help.” Never breaking the intense gaze they shared, he slid a hand beneath her skirt. He skimmed along her bare thigh and soon dipped under the elastic edge of her wet panties. She rose to balance on her knees giving him easier access. His fingertip niggled across her clit once before disappearing inside her body. She hissed in a breath as he stroked a particularly sensitive spot deeply.

Laurie leaned in and kissed him. Another of his fingers entered her as she licked her tongue between his lips. The sudden stroke of his thumb across her clit forced a shudder so violent she nearly broke the sultry kiss.

Lost in rapturous sensation, she failed to notice his free hand had moved under her shirt until he pinched a nipple through the lace of her bra. Her focused attention was triply divided between the pleasure of his hands and mouth. She couldn’t catch her breath as a powerful climax engulfed her body.

Arching backward, their kiss broke. Eyes squeezed shut at the power of the orgasm rushing through her she shrieked.

“God, you’re sexy.” Colin pulled her shirt up and with it came one breast slipping from underneath the lacy cup of her bra. His mouth fastened to her nipple teasing it with his tongue as waves of aftershock rode over her body.

His fingers slipped from her saturated core. She slumped over as he brought that hand to his mouth. Her heart slammed in her chest when he licked his fingers and her mouth fell open in surprise. Breathing hard, she tried to get hold of herself.

“You taste good.”

“You feel good.” She glanced down at the cracked leather cushion. It was likely that she’d never look at this sofa in exactly the same way again and a smile erupted.

The sound of Colin’s phone chirping interrupted their intimate moment. It wasn’t a standard phone ring, but she’d yet to identify the song playing.

He broke away and pulled the cell off his belt.

Clearing his throat once, he flipped it open. “Riley,” he sighed into the phone.

After listening for a few moments, he closed his eyes and shook his head. “Got it,” he said after a few more moments.

Snapping the phone closed without saying good-bye to his caller, he opened his eyes. "Guess what?"

"Your boss called and needs you to go do something important?"

He laughed. "Exactly. You must be psychic."

"Is this what life as the girlfriend of an FBI agent is like?"

His eyes narrowed but the smile on his face remained. "Yes. Are you interested in being my girlfriend or are you just teasing me?"

Laurie leaned closer and kissed him again. "I'm interested, as long as we keep it a secret."

"Secrets are my business, darlin'." He kissed her. "Are you ever going to give me your home phone number?"

She sent her gaze to the ceiling. "Of course, right after my aunt is put into a nursing home or institutionalized with no memory that she even has a niece." She stood up, but truly hated to leave the warmth of his embrace.

Colin chuckled as he rose from the sofa. He pulled a business card from his shirt pocket. "Why don't I give you my number. You can call me whenever you want. Leave a message if I don't answer."

Plucking the card from his fingers, she held his gaze and tucked it inside her bra. He groaned. "I would have done that for you, darlin'."

Laurie let him out the back door to where her car was parked. The small weed-strewn employee parking lot was behind the building. A single street light hovered above them sending down a modest light.

Colin grabbed her into a tight bear hug after she locked the back door. "I'm not sure when I'll be back."

"I'll be here."

He squeezed her tight and pulled away to capture her lips in a blistering kiss.

After several lip-licking moments he released her. "Don't forget, you can call me, if you want." He patted her breast where the card rested and smiled.

“Right.” It wasn’t until she stepped away from Colin that she noticed Royce’s car parked at the end of the library’s back alley. By the straightening of Colin’s spine as he walked away, she suspected he’d just noticed Royce watching them too.

Chapter 11

“We found a list of where the bodies are buried.” Ken Davenport flipped off the lights in the conference room and began the latest joint task force assignment briefing.

First to arrive in the room, Colin had been daydreaming about his complicated love life. His eyes strained to adjust in the sudden darkness. He glanced at the large white screen descending from the ceiling and realized that he wasn’t alone any longer.

Various members of two separate black ops teams had filed into the conference room where he sat and positioned themselves around the large table.

A sophisticated overhead projection system shot the first grainy, long-distance photo of Salerno onto the screen.

“Thanks to the members of my team.” Paul’s mutter was not quite under his breath.

Ken didn’t acknowledge Paul’s comment. He continued without skipping a beat. “The flash drive obtained from Salerno’s suite during the Las Vegas job,” Ken paused and nodded once in Frankie’s direction, “and deciphered very quickly by Miss Frankie Belle, was a virtual plethora of information. Much of it we already knew.

“It included not only a complete and detailed past history of his dealings dating back more than two decades, but also a listing of several residential and commercial real estate locations across the country. We can only surmise the contents of these properties contain a cache of stolen inventory.”

Ken clicked the remote and the screen behind him lit up with an old picture of Salerno standing in front of a log cabin nestled in a forest.

Salerno was dead now. Killed by the family he’d been unable to do business with because of the Vegas robbery Colin and Rachel had successfully

pulled off.

Through various cameras in the hotel's stairways and hallways, Frankie had pieced together a probable timetable of Salerno's last night on earth. They'd watched it earlier before this team effort was announced.

Salerno had raced up to the penthouse ignoring the signal to evacuate the building as the fire alarm shrilled only to find his safe emptied and the flash drive missing.

Once Salerno returned to the hallway outside his penthouse empty-handed, the thug accompanying the buyer's family had turned, pierced the camera's lens with a malicious gaze, lifted his gun and eliminated the wall mounted security camera with one shot.

After the all clear was given, the fire department found Salerno's crumpled, bullet-ridden body outside his door.

Local police had assumed custody of the crime scene. Once they heard about the fake fire alarm and that someone was caught on tape, they wanted to implicate Zack as an accessory in the murder.

The crappy kitchen surveillance tape was initially difficult to see until a technician cleaned it up. When it was learned Zack was a federal agent in the middle of a sanctioned job, the local police had wanted an internal investigation.

The allegations were denied by Senator Bremer himself, which infuriated them further. The back channels Colin's team used to get their jobs done were always authorized by the Senator and his council.

The local law enforcement complained about misuse of emergency allocations and called Ken on it. Colin knew Ken was only angry because Zack had gotten caught on tape. Once Frankie worked another miracle by destroying the original tape evidence with a virus, Ken relaxed and announced today's joint team effort to recover Salerno's goods.

Colin hoped that Rachel was off the hook for the fire alarm incident.

Ken clicked to the next slide. "This shows a diagram of the area where we'll be staging..."

Colin zoned Ken out. This meeting was for the benefit of the Protocol Agency. In a circus of moves, the flash drive Colin had found and given to Rachel ended up with Paul Kelly. Ken received the device from Paul as an under the table payment for Zack getting caught on tape. However, because Paul arranged for the

video to be corrupted, Ken was directed to allow Paul and his team in on the recovery of Salerno's treasures.

Ken informed him that Senator Bremer, for reasons unknown, insisted that the two teams work together. Colin suspected it had to do with money.

In his opinion, joint task operations were often formed because someone looked at a bottom line somewhere and tried to save a buck. Besides, Senator Bremer was well known for being a tight ass with regard to funding black ops missions. He perhaps thought it would be cheaper to combine two teams into one large task force.

Secretly, Colin was just glad for the opportunity to work with Rachel. Even if he had to endure the hairy eyeball stares from both Paul and Ken.

Late the night before, he'd left Laurie and resisted the urge to follow her home again. He'd hopped inside his rental, gunned the engine and cruised towards Royce's vehicle with the intent of having a stern conversation. The sheriff pulled away as Laurie left the library parking lot before Colin could stop him. The next time he was in Alabama, Colin planned to have a 'come-to-Jesus' chat with Royce.

The other love of his life was currently less than five feet away. It might as well have been five miles. Colin took a deep breath and closed his eyes as the scent of her perfume registered deeply and wrapped around his unsatisfied libido.

He shifted silently in his chair to relieve the sudden ache in his cock. If he didn't love his job so much he might have dived across the table, tackled her to the floor and latched his lips to hers before proceeding to do wild and wicked things. He might do it anyway just to see the expression on Paul Kelly's face.

Rachel, Frankie and Paul were seated across the table and all poised to take part in the joint task force. Colin couldn't seem to keep his attention off of Rachel, which earned him several harsh glares from Paul. He didn't care.

Rachel kept her head down and doodled on the note pad centered before her. The one time they'd locked gazes across the table it was a wonder the volcanic nature of it hadn't set off the sprinkler system.

Switching to covert glances only helped marginally. Colin realized he was totally smitten with Rachel, the lovely spy who'd saved his ass in Columbia. He was also in love with her civilian counterpart, Laurie, the shy librarian who rebelliously disobeyed her aunt just to be with him.

Watching Rachel this close made him crazy. He'd take the first opportunity to wrap her in his arms and let their unavoidable relationship flourish regardless of their respective chains of command trying to interfere.

"...we believe this location must have had some sentimental attachment to Salerno as we can't find any substantial warehouse capability for the property. He's owned and kept the place up over several years." Ken's voice drifted back in to Colin's brain.

Seated next to Colin was a replacement agent he and Zack had worked with previously on several jobs. A strapping, fairly tall, redhead, Jake was young, but a very good agent. Colin's partner, Zack, had been sent on an unnamed mission to be explained later.

Glancing at Frankie, Colin made a mental note to let Zack know that she was most definitely a babe. She was lean and tall with long, curly light brown hair, highlighted in both blonde and red. Her toothy grin beneath a wide mouth could certainly be considered inspiring. She wasn't Colin's type as a rule, but certainly not a mud hen. Zack would be disappointed to learn that he'd missed this briefing since Frankie was present.

His gaze drifted to the girl he considered his type, Rachel.

"There is so much information on the flash drive, we hardly know which treasure to dig up and sort through first..."

Colin tuned out Ken's voice again so he could study the others in the conference room. He'd purposefully sat towards the back of the room upon entering so he could surreptitiously watch the object of his desire when she arrived.

Rachel sat on the opposite side of the large black, oval table centered in the conference room. She was positioned between Frankie and Paul so he was able to monitor all three of them without it being completely obvious.

Frankie was in the first seat closest to the front of the room. She took notes like a student vying for the annual teacher's pet award. Rachel sat next to her.

Unlike her partner, she merely watched the screen on the wall. Her spine was locked into the upright position. One hand rested sedately on the table, the other out of sight. He could tell she was on edge from her posture. Perhaps she sensed him watching.

Before they'd come in to the briefing, Ken had reiterated the hands-off

speech from last week with regard to any Protocol spies. To reiterate the point, Paul approached and bestowed another malevolent glare.

Colin placed a perturbed expression on his face during any and all lectures from either Paul or Ken. If he acted too obliging, Ken would suspect he was up to something. He wasn't ready to spill about his secret knowledge regarding where Rachel spent her off hours.

Seated next to Rachel, Paul Kelly maintained a petulant arms-crossed stance, slumped in his chair as if in silent protest of Ken being in charge of this mission. Interesting attitude since he was the one who gave up the flash drive to Ken in the first place.

"Here's the oddity," Ken's voice penetrated Colin's tedium. The screen flashed to a non-descript building. It looked like an old apartment building in an aging suburb.

"This was the only address listed that we didn't already know about or suspect as belonging to Salerno." Ken turned to face the occupants of the room. "We have no idea why this property is listed with the others. It's not even registered to a name we've associated with Salerno before."

Ken flashed another slide showing the place they were headed to next. The other locations listed on the flash drive were supposedly the mother lode of Salerno's confiscated materials and stolen goods. Once inventoried, they expected to clear up several pending cases in the open federal files.

The lights came up and Ken asked, "Any questions?"

Frankie spoke up. "Which agency will be in charge of the mission?"

Ken responded smoothly, "Ours. However, Mr. Kelly and your Protocol Agency will be included in all aspects of the assignment as a joint task force."

Paul tilted his head and cracked his neck in acknowledgment.

Ken grabbed a glass of water from a table in the front of the room and asked, "Anything else?" before taking a sip.

Paul raised his hand like a second-grader wanting permission to go to the little boys' room. Ken inclined his head and barked, "Speak."

"Do you have blueprints for the building?"

Ken squinted and shrugged his shoulders. "They're being provided for tactical. Why?"

"I'd like Rachel to take a look at them before we enter the target building."

"Fine. A copy will be supplied to her."

"If there's nothing else..." He paused and glanced around the room. "...then prepare to fly to St. Louis this afternoon. Wheels are up in an hour. We'll give out specific assignments in the air."

Rachel didn't look at him, but Frankie did. She glanced between the two of them several times. Colin thought he saw a hint of a smile and decided she might be a great ally. Paul on the other hand fairly growled each time he caught Colin's eye or was forced to communicate with him.

Ken's voice penetrated his occupied mind. "Colin? A word please."

He expected another lecture about Rachel or a reprimand or perhaps both. "Where's Zack?" Colin asked quickly to throw Ken off.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. He's in Columbia."

That got his attention. "Columbia? Why?" Surprised he wasn't being chastised made him unprepared for any other subjects.

"We got an interesting anonymous tip and I sent Zack to follow up."

"What anonymous tip about Columbia?"

Ken's distracted expression didn't focus on his face. He looked past Colin's shoulder at Paul and his two agents in a huddle at the other side of the room. "Luis Montoya escaped from the Columbian prison he was sent to after his arrest." Ken looked him in the eye. "My source said he must have had help to get out, but no one has any concrete information on who it was and no one at the prison is admitting anything."

Colin narrowed his gaze. "Luis had lots of loyal followers outside of Raoul Ortega's organization. It could be any one of a dozen guys. I know several places to check."

Ken nodded. "Once we check out Salerno's mystery residence, I'll send you to meet Zack at a rendezvous location for back up. You're too hot to show your face in Columbia."

"If you go back you'll have to resurrect Tommy Callahan. He's supposed to be incarcerated. If you're out you'd need a plausible reason why you haven't been seen languishing in prison like all the others. It was easier to send Zack."

“Right.”

“And another thing,” Ken leaned in close and smiled. “Stay away from the blonde.”

* * * *

Rachel watched Colin at every opportunity during the headquarters briefing and again during the pre-flight meeting prior to getting on the plane. An hour later, both teams were comfortably seated in a chartered Cessna aircraft and headed to the Midwest.

It hadn't been fully explained why she was allowed to work with Colin, but she suspected it was not Paul's idea. He'd given her another lecture and several glares to reiterate his commandment that she leave Colin alone. At the last minute, Paul decided to accompany them on the trip.

Paul expected her undying cooperation.

Rachel wasn't quite ready to give up the fight for a boyfriend quite yet. Colin made her blood boil in desire from across the room. His mere presence brought thoughts and memories that were not at all suited for mission business.

The times she'd been successful in her surreptitious glances, Colin had been watching her too. The thought made her smile internally, but she knew if there were any 'challenges' on this mission, Paul would blame it on the relationship between them. She didn't want to incur any further lectures or face his wrath so she vowed to be on her best behavior until the task was complete. After that, all bets were off. Her next mission was going to be a manhunt.

Once they were in the air, Ken briefed further. “We'll be landing at Lambert International Airport in a couple of hours. From there we'll rendezvous at a safe house and pick up our gear and vehicles. Our initial mission is to investigate this residence, get inside if we can and collect intelligence as to why it's on Salerno's secret flash drive. We'll have two of you infiltrate the residence, one will remain outside for perimeter control and the other will monitor the com-link.”

“Who's going inside?” Paul asked. He crossed his arms and Rachel figured she was about to be put on com-link detail even though Frankie was better at it.

“Frankie will be assigned to monitor communications during the mission. Jake is on perimeter control.” Ken glanced at Colin and added, “The other two will go inside. Any other questions?”

Rachel had an uneasy feeling, but decided it was due to the rampant and unholy urges she experienced whenever she caught Colin’s gaze. Physically, they maintained a healthy distance, but the air in the small aircraft crackled with the sexual tension arcing between them.

Once they landed, the team divided into groups and assembled at the safe house by mid-afternoon. Rachel anticipated the mission and promised herself she’d try her best not to have any challenges. She’d be lying if she said she wasn’t looking forward to working with Colin. She was.

Smart, resourceful and capable, she recognized that Colin was a solid agent from working with him briefly both in Columbia and in Las Vegas. Rachel wanted their mission to be one hundred percent successful. No trials this time. She vowed to remain focused and professional until the end of the assignment.

The street where the building resided was secluded and quiet. It wasn’t a dead end in the traditional sense, as the road turned to a dirt one, and eventually led to a developing construction project.

Large tree-filled lots on three sides of their target made each property along the way seem sheltered and remote. Across the street, a line of tall trees stood in even rows just inside a high chain link fence marking the property line of a city park. Three blocks further was the edge of the bustling city but here it was almost like being in the country.

Having studied the blueprints of the small structure, Rachel had the layout secured in her mind. The front door was unlocked and unmanned, and the way they intended to enter after dusk. Posing as salespeople in case there was anyone living there, she and Colin wore business casual over their tactical gear.

Frankie and the van were parked unseen a block from the target. Together they sauntered down the uneven sidewalk until they reached the opening in the battered low fence flanking each side of a weed-strewn path to the building, they made a sharp right following the path leading to the front door.

Three splintered and dilapidated steps greeted them as they climbed to the porch. Rachel grabbed the rusted metal knob and pushed the door inward. Surprisingly, it didn’t squeak.

Colin stuck his head inside and nodded. She pushed it in the rest of the

way. They both entered the foyer carefully. Rachel kept the door from slamming, then clicked her collar transmitter twice to let Frankie know they were safely inside.

The original blueprints showed two main doors leading to apartments on the ground floor, but someone had sheet-rocked the doors over.

A narrow staircase climbing to a platform stood before them. There was a single bare bulb from half way up the landing dangling from an unseen ceiling above illuminating the two-story entryway.

Colin signaled for them to ascend to the second floor. She nodded and followed him upstairs. The eerie silence gnawed at her nerves. They weren't expecting to find anyone, but a fanciful part of her imagination hoped they wouldn't stumble across Salerno's ghostly presence.

Arriving at the top of the surprisingly solid staircase, they were faced with two doors, one on the left and one directly across from it. Colin nodded to her and pointed to both doors. She shrugged and pointed to the one on the left.

Thus far they hadn't spoken a word since leaving Frankie in the van. Jake was supposed to follow and circle around the perimeter in case he was needed. The quiet became unnerving for some reason. It was like sneaking around a haunted funhouse waiting for something to jump out and scare the crap out of you.

Colin tried the door she'd selected. It was locked. He crossed the landing to try the other one. Also locked. Rachel squatted before the first sturdy looking, six-panel wooden door and pulled out her lock picks.

As she manipulated the picks, she was suddenly very aware of Colin standing beside her. The last time she'd used lock picks in his presence she'd been sans panties and shaking from the orgasm he'd just given her. Dismissing the seductive recollection a single word blasted in her mind.

Professional.

She needed to remain aloof and simply do her job right now, not take a trip down memory lane.

The final tumbler clicked into place releasing the mechanism and opening the door inward. At the same exact time a shaft of light illuminated the space below the door's kick plate.

Rachel registered that someone was inside in the same second that a woman's scream ripped through the air.

Chapter 12

“Who...who is out there?” A young woman’s stuttering panicked voice registered.

Rachel unsnapped her holster and put her hand around the grip of her gun. The front door swung open on silent hinges and she entered the apartment in a crouched position pulling her gun before she entered. Colin drew his weapon and followed close behind into the small living room.

“FBI,” Colin shouted as he raised his gun to shoulder level.

The occupant of the apartment stood on the far side of the room in the doorway to what looked like a kitchen.

Dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, her stringy, dirty-blond hair hung down past her emaciated shoulders. She lifted her skinny pale arms in the air and he saw her shaking from across the room.

Colin was about to apologize for making a horrible mistake until a man stepped into the doorway behind her, wielding a nine-millimeter pistol. He shoved the gun past the girl’s shoulder and got off a round as Colin pushed Rachel to the floor one-handed.

“Drop your weapon,” Colin yelled and fingered the trigger.

“Screw you.” The gunman shoved the frail woman out of the doorway and took aim. Colin fired a round directly into his chest. The man pulled the trigger of his weapon but luckily the shot went wild and into the ceiling.

The young woman slid her hands over her ears and screamed. She scrambled across the living room in a hunched-over run and disappeared into an arched doorway along the opposite wall.

From the floor Rachel shouted, “She’s getting away!”

In his ear he heard Frankie’s concerned voice, “Was that gunfire? Do you need back up?”

He keyed his radio, "No, stand by. There's a male and a female in the upper west apartment. The male is down and the female is on the run."

Rachel leapt up and sprinted after the woman. She chased her through the arched doorway and out of his sight. Colin shouted, "Wait!" but Rachel was already gone.

Colin ran to the gunman now flat on his back and not moving. He kicked the gun out of the guy's hand watching it slide out of his immediate reach across the nicked linoleum of the small kitchen.

Studying the features of the gunman, Colin thought he looked familiar, but couldn't place him. An associate of Salerno's maybe? He felt for a pulse and found a strong one beating at the man's throat. Not dead, just out.

Colin rolled the guy over and slipped on handcuffs. He turned and followed cautiously through the doorway where Rachel had disappeared. It led into a short hallway with an open door at the end.

He didn't see either the woman or Rachel.

From the opening he heard a man's voice shout. "Drop it or I kill her!" He *knew* that voice. Impossible. It couldn't be.

"You won't kill her," Rachel's angry tone shot out to where he stood.

Salerno's voice drifted out to the hall where Colin waited. "She's a whore I brought up here to fuck. Her life means nothing to me."

"You shoot her and you'll lose your human shield. I'll take the next shot and kill you, I promise."

Through the crack between the door and the wall, Colin saw a narrow sliver of the scene in the bedroom. Salerno held the woman against him as he slowly backed up towards another door across the bedroom.

"You aren't allowed to kill me. You have rules!"

"Guess again, slime ball. Everyone already thinks you're dead. If I kill you, it's no problem at all."

Salerno took another long step backwards.

"Stop moving." Rachel moved into Colin's view and leveled her gun at his head.

"You won't take me." Salerno pushed the woman towards Rachel and

darted into what Colin presumed was the bathroom.

The door slammed shut and Rachel advanced a step. The woman flung herself past Rachel and fell on the bed as Colin entered the bedroom.

Two gun blasts came through the door where Salerno had disappeared splintering the wood and narrowly missing Rachel.

“Where the hell does he think he’s going?” Colin crouched down and duck-walked to Rachel keeping an eye on the door. “Is there a fire escape outside the bathroom window or something?” Colin flattened himself against the wall next to the bed where Rachel squatted.

She didn’t answer at first. She squinted at the bathroom door from behind the edge of the bed where she dove when the shots came through it. After a second, her eyes rounded. “No. He’s going to the basement.”

“The basement? How is that possible?”

Instead of responding, she stood up and darted out of the room. Colin wondered what she was doing.

“Where are you going?”

Stifling the urge to follow her, he turned toward the closed door of the bathroom making sure to keep out of the line of fire should Salerno fire off a few more rounds.

Colin eyed the woman cowering in the corner of the bedroom. Shaking, curled in a ball and quietly praying, he didn’t expect she’d be much help.

He asked anyway, “Do you know Salerno?” She stared at him blankly but didn’t respond.

“Buccaneer, do you copy?” Rachel’s breathy voice called in his head. She was apparently running downstairs.

“This is Buccaneer. Go.”

“Look for the laundry chute in the bathroom. Make sure Salerno isn’t hanging on from inside so he can crawl out later.”

Colin’s eyebrows went straight up. “Roger that.”

Holy shit!

Salerno escaped through a laundry chute to the basement?

Frankie's voice uttered, "Salerno? Are you crazy? He's dead."

"Not anymore." Over the communications link, Colin heard her panting lightly. It sounded like she was still running. "I'm headed for the ground floor now. I'll have to come out the front door and go around to the back."

Creeping towards the bathroom door silently, Colin listened. He didn't hear any movement from inside. Impulsively, he kicked the door to the bathroom inward initiating a surprise attack, just in case. As the cheap door bounced off the inner wall, Colin brought his gun up prepared to shoot to kill.

An overly large space greeted him, but the bathroom was empty. He swung his gun around wondering how in the hell Salerno was still alive.

He flipped the bathroom lights on and found a large brass handle situated below a built-in shelf filled with towels. Gun drawn, he wrapped his hand around the wide knob pull and yanked hard, but only an empty laundry chute greeted him.

On his radio Colin heard Rachel shout for Jake using his call sign. "Mustang, head for the back of the building. Look for the external basement doors. Salerno is escaping."

There was a pause before Jake said, "This is Mustang, I copy. I'm on my way."

From below and through the laundry chute, he heard hollow echoing shouts.

Salerno was alive. *Un-fucking-believable.*

* * * *

Rachel ran like her ass was on fire, stumbling down the stairs in her haste to get out the front door of the apartment building. She leapt into the knee-high weeds off the front porch and zoomed around the corner of the house. Victory would be hers, if she could pull off the coup of the century, by catching and detaining Salerno fresh from his hidey-hole after he'd faked his death.

She'd had to force her mouth not to drop open in surprise when she chased the woman into the bedroom. She'd gone straight into the arms of Salerno next to the bed. For an old man, he had good reflexes, she'd thought, as he snagged a gun

from beneath one of the pillows and took aim.

As soon as he'd disappeared into the bathroom she remembered the large laundry chute from the blueprints she'd studied.

Hustling to the rear of the apartment building, she was afraid Salerno would get away before she could catch him. And she wanted to nail him very badly.

Rounding the corner to the overgrown back yard, Rachel searched the darkness along the house for the basement doors she was certain Salerno would bolt from any second.

A light flipped on from overhead as an old street light posted in the back yard flickered to life behind her position and startled her. She turned and saw Jake emerge from the tree line in the lot next door. He was fifty yards away and moved cautiously.

Spinning back to search for the outer basement door, she almost tripped over it. Rachel only had time to bring her gun up before one side of the double doors raised and Salerno slipped out of the narrow opening. He was faced away and didn't apparently see her at first.

Bringing her weapon up in a two-handed hold she screamed, "Freeze, scumbag!"

Salerno didn't freeze. Instead, he shot one leg out and kicked her gun hand. Her hands flew apart wide, but amazingly she managed to keep her gun in hand. Salerno lowered his leg and promptly charged her with fists flying.

Off balance from the kick, she fought to stay on her feet. His first blow glanced across one cheek but rolled off and slid past her ear. It stung like crazy. She tried to angle the gun toward his torso as he tackled her to the ground. The gun fired, but the shot went skyward.

He punched her in the side and she felt the sturdy blow all the way through her rib cage to a couple vital organs. Drawing her arms up to protect her face, she twisted her hips and one of his knees folded and popped. He growled in pain as he fell forward. Rachel managed to slide sideways. She leveraged herself out from underneath him. Salerno grunted and fell on his side in the grass. She let momentum carry her over until she straddled his chest. He was panting but it didn't stop him from aiming a fist at her face and connecting another punch to the same cheek.

Rachel put her gun to his jaw. "Hit me again, old man, and it'll be the last thing you ever do." The ache in her side from his brutal punch was forgotten as was the sting of her face. He relaxed and stopped fighting. There was something to be said for the threat of a gun aimed under your chin.

A frown shaped his thin mouth. "You're the one who's going to be sorry, girlie."

Gun drawn, Jake approached slowly. He whispered into his collar transmitter, but she couldn't hear what he said. Hopefully, he was calling for reinforcements.

"You okay?" Jake asked training his gun on Salerno's forehead. The circular bead of red from the laser's sight lit up the deep wrinkles between Salerno's cold, angry, mud-brown eyes.

"I'm good."

Glancing at her face Jake added, "You're bleeding."

Rachel immediately wiped her nose with her free hand, but her hand came away clean. The sting of the cut on her cheek registered and she brushed her fingertips below the cut. Pulling away a small drop of blood, she smiled. "It's nothing." It's a small price to pay for such a big mission win.

Adrenalin raced through her system and made her breathing heavy, but Rachel felt a victory dance coming on after this completely successful mission. Beyond the fact that they didn't expect any criminals to rise from the dead, she was excited to have avoided any challenges. Colin jogged around the corner to the back yard after several minutes and helped get Salerno up and handcuffed.

Surprisingly docile, after his foiled great escape, Salerno didn't resist when Jake and Colin arrested him. Salerno stared at Rachel. "I'll get you for this, bitch."

Piercing him with a tired look, she said, "Yeah. Whatever. I'm shaking in my government issued low heels."

Salerno glanced at Colin and Jake. He laughed. "And you will pay as well. All of you will pay for this."

Colin's expression said he was less tolerant of Salerno's threats. "I'll remember that when you're convicted for all the charges piling up for your imminent incarceration. And once you're in prison, you'll be the one paying, you fuck." Colin nodded at Jake. "Take him to the car."

Turning to her, Colin gave her a quick once over. Not with sexual intent, but with obvious concern. Zeroing in on her cheek he asked, "You okay?"

"I'm great." Her exuberance was hard to contain.

He grinned and moved closer. "I have to tell you, that had to be the most amazing work I've ever seen. From picking the locks to knowing that Salerno went down a laundry chute, only to end up pistol whipping him in the backyard. Fucking amazing." He laughed. "Seriously, I'm in awe."

Rachel nodded. "Thanks. You weren't so bad yourself."

"I didn't do much, basically followed you with my mouth hanging open in admiration."

She laughed. "But you didn't ever question me or once tell me I was crazy." Piercing him with an appreciative stare, she added, "Coming from a male counterpart in this business, I appreciate that. Thank you."

He shrugged and took another step closer. His new predatory gaze seared through her and he whispered, "I miss you."

Rachel glanced around and didn't see anyone. "I miss you, too." Taking the rare opportunity of being alone with Colin, she threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him.

In her ear bud radio, she heard Frankie say her name. She didn't want to be interrupted. Failing to respond, Rachel ultimately answered the summons by turning her transmitter off. She just wanted a few minutes alone.

She decided she'd earned it.

Heedless of the fact that anyone could come trotting up and witness this most public display, Rachel wiggled her tongue between his lips for a deeper taste. His groan mirrored her exact feelings. Warm heat centered in her chest and swooped lower into her body until her core wept with desire. There wasn't a spot on her skin that wasn't buzzing with excitement and need.

She wanted Colin and she wanted sex. She deserved a victory dance complete with erotic complications and generous doses of satisfaction. His warm luscious mouth devoured hers. His tongue zinged and darted between her lips tasting and touching every crevice as if he couldn't get it deep enough or move it fast enough.

Rachel pondered the unholy desire she had to push him to the ground and

to hell with public display. Her hips migrated towards his in rebellious longing for the sex she'd have to wait for.

Colin broke the kiss panting and whispered, "Is there any way for you to slip away after the briefing in DC?" The question danced against her lips. Not waiting for a response, he delved inside her mouth to tangle tongues again.

After several moments she disengaged long enough to say, "Perhaps."

"Please. I'm desperate."

Rachel felt his desperation rising against her hip and an enormous gush of moisture shot into her panties in response. She pondered briefly the impossibility of getting time alone for some naked aerobics in the immediate future, but a noise behind them followed by a stern voice quelled the thought.

"Get your lips off my agent!"

* * * *

Paul and Ken exchanged a quick shocked stare as Jake marched Salerno into view. There was a long moment of silence as he was escorted to the waiting car to be whisked away for interrogation.

"Do you want in on the questioning?" Ken's voice sliced through the expectant air hovering in the vehicle.

"Not necessarily. If you'd be kind enough to mention my agency a few hundred times in your official report, I'll let you have the collar."

"That's so very generous of you and completely out of character. What gives?"

"I don't want Rachel in contact with your agent. Where are they?"

Frankie perked up. She keyed the microphone and said, "Rachel?" After several seconds, Frankie failed to hide her amusement and shook her head indicating Rachel didn't respond.

Paul sighed and moved to exit the communications van. The unmarked federal car holding Salerno drove away as he descended the three stairs to the pavement. He had no doubt she was with Colin and he vowed to put a stop to it once and for all.

Quietly amazed at the events of tonight, he'd been loath to send Rachel on this short mission with Colin, but together they'd done very well. Salerno's hideout, in fact, held the best treasure of all. Salerno was alive and now under Ken's operational jurisdiction.

Rounding the back corner of the house the path opened up to the back yard and a field of knee-high grass. Immediately visible was Rachel in a serious lip-lock with Colin. Damn it.

"Get your lips off my agent!" Paul growled before common sense could intrude. Colin eventually stopped the kiss, but not fast enough. Rachel turned and gave him a narrowed-eyed glare over one shoulder but didn't release him. Paul knew he wouldn't win any points by coming across as irritated, even though he was extremely so.

Paul released a deep breath and tried to relax so he could tell her what he'd come out to say. Pasting a smile on his face he nodded once. "Good job, Rachel."

Her shocked expression in return made him realize he spent too much time criticizing and lecturing after her missions and not enough time praising her efforts.

"You too, Mr. Riley. Both of you did an amazing job tonight." This earned him an equally puzzled stare from Colin.

Digging his hands into his pockets, Paul scanned her head to toe and noticed the cut on her face. Blood glistened on one cheek and it sent a chill straight to his heart.

"You're hurt."

Rachel sighed and removed her arms from around Colin's neck. "I'll live."

Arms locked stiffly at her side, she turned to face him as a belligerent expression registered.

Before she could blister him with her opinion, he rushed to say, "Still, I've set you up on an earlier flight out of here ahead of time tonight so you can report to medical." Paul glanced at Colin once. "The rest of the team can do the clean up."

Her lips pursed then flattened. "I don't need to be coddled."

Paul tilted his head back to stare at the night sky a moment before leveling

her with an irate gaze. “Jesus, I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

“You aren’t my father.”

“No. I’m your superior. And as such, I require you to be fit for duty.” Paul glanced at his watch. “You need to get going to make your flight.”

“So this was set up in advance?”

Paul exhaled deeply. “Yes.”

Rachel’s fiery stare slid to his once more and a devilish smile shaped her lips. Before Paul could stop it, and he would have given the time, Rachel grabbed Colin’s face, pulled his head close and pressed her lips hard over his mouth for another kiss.

Paul tightened his fists, when he saw her tongue slide along Colin’s lower lip, but in the next instant she separated their bodies allowing only a small distance.

“See you in DC, lover.” Rachel smiled at Colin, which he returned. Purposely not looking in Paul’s direction, she turned and walked away from the two men without a backward glance.

Paul released a deep sigh, and muttered, “Not if I can help it.”

Colin snorted. “Are you seriously going to try and keep us apart?”

Paul took a deep breath to keep from shouting. *Keep your fucking hands off of my agent!* Instead he managed to say calmly, “I’d prefer that your relationship remained on a more professional level.”

A smile shaped Colin’s mouth. “The more you try to keep us apart, the more she’ll fight to see me.”

“Is that a threat, Mr. Riley? I assure you I’m immune.”

“No. It’s a fact.” He turned to stare directly into Paul’s surely weary face. “I happen to care for her. I believe she cares for me. Why is it such a big fucking problem for us to be together?”

Paul worded his next response carefully. He wasn’t the type to share any information regarding his group of agents, but at the same time Colin and Rachel needed to remain apart. “Protocol agents have unique constraints that I’m not at liberty to explain. There is a fragile balance in the structure of our training that must be maintained in order for her to succeed. You do not fit into our program.”

“We succeeded just fine tonight.”

“But that isn’t always the case, is it? You prevented her from doing her mission in Las Vegas to the detriment of your own partner.” Paul bored his own angry gaze into Colin. “And because of you, she was nearly late to her rendezvous in the woods of Columbia. Do her career a favor and refrain from any further romantic contact.”

Colin didn’t respond. He simply walked away, his stiff gait an indicator he wasn’t likely to take Paul’s advice.

So be it. There were other ways to ensure they remained apart.

The truth was Rachel had been thrust into his group without regard to her capabilities. Someone had secretly recruited her behind his back and put her through the invasive and rigorous training before he was made aware or able to stop it.

For that he blamed Senator Bremer. *Vengeful bastard.*

Long ago, Paul had accidentally made a tragic error of judgment with regards to a woman. The result being that he’d earned a lifelong enemy. Poking Senator Bremer in the ass with a branding iron would have resulted in less censure. At the time, Paul hadn’t realized the far-reaching nature of Bremer’s power. A hard lesson he’d learned early in his career and in the end, and Rachel was now the one paying the price.

He didn’t begrudge her a love life, however it wasn’t conducive to this group. Besides the long term effects had never been tested. It was the primary reason he had an ex-agent parading as her aunt to keep her out of trouble and out of relationships when she wasn’t working.

If he didn’t have Senator Bremer up his ass everyday about putting Rachel out on every available mission, Paul knew he’d have her languishing in Alabama living a very quiet life as a part-time librarian.

Pure torture didn’t begin to cover what he endured as he was repeatedly forced to send his only living relative out into a dangerous world as a covert black ops spy.

Chapter 13

Paul gnashed his teeth during the entire return flight of the plane he'd privately chartered. He also ground his molars in the blessedly quiet cab ride all alone headed back to his office in DC. A pounding headache had formed at the back of his skull relentlessly vibrating the pain to the center of his forehead.

Despite the success of the recent mission, he was antsy for the partnership between his Protocol agents and Ken's black ops group to end. He hoped Senator Bremer would cooperate in this matter. The less time spent in field operations with them the better chance he had to keep Colin and Rachel apart.

It was a relationship that would go nowhere.

He knew first hand what kind of man Colin Riley was, recognizing himself in the younger agent. Once upon a time Paul had also been involved in a tenuous relationship, a relationship that should never have taken place.

Jessica.

He took a moment and remembered his lust-filled attraction to her as if it were yesterday.

The afternoon traffic back from the airport made the journey twice as long as it normally would have been. Glancing at his watch, he realized he was running very late. Back in the secluded ops building, he hurried to his office. No time for anymore memories of sweet Jessica right now.

Paul dropped his jacket and briefcase in the chair next to his desk and noticed that his phone's message light flashed wildly. The maximum speed of the light fluttering meant he had the maximum number of calls allowed already waiting to be sorted through. Given his luck, half of them were surely from Senator Bremer rabidly demanding a report on the progress of the mission.

Later.

First he'd go to the closing briefing for the St. Louis mission and

hopefully be rid of the other group. Forcing himself not to gallop to make it on time ensured that he came across as calm and reserved when he felt anything but that. He strolled leisurely into the meeting five minutes after the start time as if those inside should have waited for him before starting.

Seated alone on one side of the immense black conference table, Frankie sighed deeply and looked very glad to see him arrive. Reassured even. That was unusual. Her relief didn't last long after the pneumatic door snapped shut behind him.

Frankie looked over his shoulder at the closed entrance. "Where's Rachel? Isn't she with you?" The palpable alarm in her tone gave him pause. She stood up. "I haven't seen her since we got back."

"Relax. I sent her ahead to medical. She's probably been there and gone." Paul thought back to the messages flashing on his office desk and wished he'd taken the time to at least check them.

Colin stood. "She's not there now and she hasn't been there since yesterday. I already checked. No one in medical has seen her. I don't think she made it back from the mission."

Paul frowned. "I told them to keep *you* out of medical. Guess it's time to fire someone." His flip attitude concealed his own growing concern.

Rachel should have been back here to the facility well before any of the members of the mission team. The Protocol Agency shared this centrally located and completely secret building with other black ops agencies. Security was tight, but she was authorized by her fingerprints and retinas to gain entrance. Any door she passed through would register both and thus she could be located anywhere in the building.

"What have you done with her, Mr. Kelly? I know you don't want us together, but this seems very extreme." Colin's stiffly held frame, fisted hands and snotty demeanor displayed his obvious worry.

"I didn't *do* anything with her." Paul frowned. "I sent her back here on a privately chartered flight." Sticking a hand in his front pocket, he gripped his cell phone and removed it to check for messages. "Perhaps the departure was delayed or the flight redirected due to bad weather." He didn't believe it since the weather report in the newspaper he'd read on his own return flight showed blue skies all across the continental U.S. for the entire week.

"The main facility check point doesn't show her in residence anywhere in

the complex,” Frankie said quietly. “She never showed up here after the mission in St. Louis.”

Colin stepped away from his chair and took two aggressive steps in Paul’s direction. “Where is she?”

Fisting his phone in one hand he barked, “I don’t answer to you.” Paul turned towards Ken. “Tell your agent to stand down or I’ll have him removed.”

Ken stood up from his position at head of the table and a grim frown slid into place. “For the record, Rachel was a part of *my* team during the last mission. You didn’t have the authority to send her anywhere without at least consulting with me.” Ken smoothed his tie then pegged him with another harsh stare. “Is she really missing or did you send her elsewhere to keep her out of my agent’s reach?”

Paul didn’t like the accusatory atmosphere in the room. His eyebrows crunched in anger. “She’s *my* agent. Always. And I don’t answer to you either.” He thumbed a number into his phone from memory, put the device to his ear and looked away from Ken’s critical expression.

“Yeah, this is Kelly. I need to check—” The private pilot he’d called started jabbering disjointedly before he could finish his sentence.

“I’ve been trying to get a hold of you, Mr. Kelly! Your agent never showed up for her flight. I’ve left a thousand messages on your office phone. I didn’t have any other number for you. I’m still in St Louis. What do you want me to do?”

“Fuck.” Paul closed his eyes repeating the curse in his mind several more times. “Stay there. Don’t move. I’ll call you back.”

Colin hadn’t taken his eyes off of Paul since he’d entered the room. The concern etched in his eyes was touching. “She was hurt. Maybe it was worse than we thought.” His softer tone didn’t prepare Paul for the next question out of his mouth. “Would she go to Alabama?”

Frankie’s eyes narrowed. “Alabama?” She turned to Paul. “Why would she go there?”

Paul couldn’t stop his eyes from bulging. No wonder Rachel was fucked up, having nosebleeds and now missing.

The blood pounded through his veins as he realized that Colin knew where Rachel’s alter ego lived.

* * * *

The impact of his confession was very satisfying to watch. He knew it was flagrant and he'd wanted to shock Paul into telling the truth about where Rachel was. Unfortunately, he forgot about Frankie being in the room. The confusion was evident in her creased forehead and puzzled expression. Colin didn't want to see blood flying out of her nose any time soon either.

Paul's face flashed beet red and a vein in his forehead bulged to the point Colin thought it might implode.

Through clenched teeth, Paul sucked in a noisy breath and said, "Frankie, go check any surveillance we have from any source on Rachel's departure from the mission site in St. Louis. Hack into whatever cameras you need to. She never made it to the airport. Also find out which government vehicle she used and locate the driver, the vehicle or both."

"On it. I'll be in the complex's communications lab." Frankie zipped out of the room bewilderment embolden on her features replaced quickly by determination.

Ken nodded to Jake. "Go help her."

Jake hastened out of the room on Frankie's heels.

The pneumatic door hissed and snapped shut leaving only Ken, Paul and Colin remaining in the silent room.

Paul leaned forward and placed his palms flat on the conference table. "Mr. Riley. You will now explain to me absolutely everything you know about Alabama with regard to my agent."

Colin crossed his arms as a defiant streak roared through him. "No."

"No?" Paul's hands fisted on the table. "This is a serious breach of security. I could have you locked up and tortured until you tell me everything you know. The idea is also very appealing on a personal level. I'd reconsider if I were you."

"It would be a waste of time and you know it." Colin tilted his head to one side and stretched his neck. "I found Laurie Peterson by accident months ago."

Paul's eyes mashed shut when Colin said her alter ego name. Breathing

deeply a couple times, he asked quietly, “Where did you find her?”

“The Millbrook City Police Department Homicide Division. My cousin works there.”

Paul’s face contorted into a puzzled squinty-eyed glare. “Why in the fuck was she there?”

Colin suppressed the urge to shrug his shoulders and pretend ignorance. “She confessed to a murder she thought she’d committed. You know, the embezzler that Rachel killed?”

“How can you possibly know that?” Paul stood and came around to his side of the table. Ken grabbed his shoulder to stop his advancement towards Colin. This earned Ken a malevolent look, but Paul stopped moving.

“By pure providence I assure you.”

Paul’s hands clenched and unclenched at his side. “I’m not assured.”

“Laurie experienced missing time and blackouts. She dreamt about the missions Rachel was on.”

“How do you know?”

Colin’s eyebrows went up and he smiled. “How do you think? She told me.”

Paul’s arctic blue eyes locked with his. “How many times have you been to see her?”

“Several.”

“What did you say to cause the nosebleed?”

Colin sighed and broke the staring contest. “Which time?”

“Fuck. There was more than one time?”

Nodding he answered, “I mentioned meeting in Alabama to Rachel when we were in the Las Vegas hotel room. That’s why she got a nosebleed and missed completing her mission task.

“I mentioned Columbia to Laurie...” he paused and decided against saying ‘in bed’, “...when we were together in Alabama. I couldn’t mention Rachel’s life to Laurie or her nose would bleed. And visa versa with Rachel. Technically, the nosebleed in Las Vegas was my fault.”

“They were both your fault,” Paul grated out.

“Fine. String me up later, but find her now.”

Paul’s eyes fairly bulged out of the sockets. He placed his thumb and forefinger on the bridge of his nose and squeezed. “How long have you known?”

“I met her the day before I went on my mission to Columbia. I kept her from falling down some stairs at the police station. But she ran off.

“Two months later she showed up in Columbia as Rachel and I convinced her to save my ass. I didn’t even recognize her at first. I just thought she looked familiar.

“When I got back I was surprised to find out how difficult it was to locate one female spy. You called me off and told me to stop looking for Rachel.” He smirked. “So I did.”

“Then you went back to Alabama and hunted down Laurie.”

Colin nodded. “Yes. I found her.”

“How did you trace her?”

“What difference does it make?”

Paul advanced a step closer and fairly growled, “I need to know where the breakdown in my department is. Did you get someone to talk?”

“No. Nothing like that.” Colin shook his head. “She left an obscure phone number that traced to the library where she works part-time. I didn’t even expect to find her there.”

“Did she remember you?” Paul had stopped pinching the bridge of his nose.

Colin almost laughed in memory, but stifled the urge. “She remembered me from the police station, but not from Columbia. I just thought she was really good at undercover work and staying in character while on another mission.”

Paul shook his head. “Unbelievable.”

The conference phone, resting in the center of table, buzzed. “Mr. Davenport? I have an urgent message from one of your agents.”

“Take a message, Miss Pemberton.” Ken shook his head slowly back and forth and sighed.

“He said to tell you he has vital information to report on your St. Louis mission. He’s on a secure line.”

Ken’s jaws clenched in annoyance before he asked, “Who is it?”

“Zack Mahon.”

“Put him through.”

The black, triangular conference phone squawked out a short beep before Zack’s gravelly low voice came across. “Salerno’s alive.”

Ken’s eyebrows went straight to his hairline. “That’s old news. We have him in custody. The sixty-four thousand dollar question is, how do you know?”

Ambient city noises came through the line before Zack answered, “I traced Luis Montoya’s escape from the Columbian prison to our favorite bad guy. Salerno funded Montoya’s escape and secret insertion into the U.S. in return for a very large favor, which was to occur in Las Vegas. I believe we can all guess what that was.”

“Where is Montoya now?”

“No clue, but undoubtedly he’s already in the states. The only other tidbit was that Salerno staged his own death with the help of someone, and I’m quoting here, ‘intimately acquainted’ with the top echelon of Raoul Ortega’s organization.”

“Who?”

“Don’t know. But it had to be someone who either wasn’t there the night of the raid or was released from jail later. I’m checking around discretely to get a list of possible suspects.”

Ken sighed. “Any idea who helped Montoya out of the Columbian prison?”

Zack never missed a beat. “No. So far, not a whisper of who it is. Could be the same person who helped Salerno, but by now, Montoya could be anywhere in the U.S.”

“When can you get back here?” Ken asked.

“Tomorrow. Day after, at the latest. After I meet with my local contact.”

“Good. Call if you discover his identity.”

“Copy that.”

Ken reached out to disconnect the call.

The click over the intercom signaled that Zack had already hung up. The room was silent for several seconds.

“Now what?” Colin asked.

Paul murmured, “We find her.”

“How?”

“Leave it to my Protocol team.”

“I want in,” Colin barked.

“No.” Paul crossed his arms and smirked.

“Both of you shut up,” Ken shouted.

The conference phone buzzed once again.

“Mr. Davenport?”

“What!” Ken snarled. He shook his head and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, Miss Pemberton. What is it?”

“I’m sorry to bother you again, sir, but there’s a man insisting on speaking with Mr. Kelly.”

“Who is it?” Paul asked as he frowned.

“He won’t identify himself with a name, sir. He said to address him as El Lobo. He’s calling from a cellular phone. I’ve ordered a tech to run a trace.”

“Shit.” Colin knew that Luis Montoya had called himself El Lobo in Columbia. He had an engraved lighter with a howling wolf on it. A grim feeling hit low in his stomach. “It’s Montoya.”

Paul’s eyes narrowed. He said, “Go ahead and put him through, Miss Pemberton.”

“Mr. Kelly?” A deeply accented voice came through the conference phone.

“What do you want?” Paul barked.

Montoya laughed. “No. You mistake me. I have something that you want.”

“I doubt that very much. Where did you get my name?”

In the background of the phone line came the distinct sound of a whip being snapped. A feminine shriek quickly followed.

Rachel?

"I have your agent, Mr. Kelly. If you want to see her alive again you will do exactly as I say."

Ken's eyes widened and he sent an inquisitive look to Colin.

Paul calmly replied, "What agent are you talking about?"

Another whip noise snapped, followed by another scream over the static-filled line. Colin sent a panicked gaze to Paul and took a step closer to the phone.

Paul's face went pale. He clamped his hands into fists but didn't speak.

Montoya laughed lightly as if amused by the game they played. "The agent that you're surely looking for by now. Let me help your quest by making it very easy. I have her."

The door opened to the conference room and Miss Pemberton leaned in far enough to hand a piece of paper to Ken. As he read the information, his mouth tightened in a way that Colin recognized as being bad news. Handing the note to Paul, Ken stepped closer to Miss Pemberton and whispered some instruction in her ear. She nodded and left the room.

"I'm calling from your agent's cellular device." Montoya's smug tone suggested he knew he'd been traced. "Rachel became much more interested in helping us once we found a way to persuade her."

Colin took another aggressive step closer to the phone. He wanted to reach through the line and rip Montoya's head off. Paul's hand came up in a stop gesture as if he expected Colin to try something.

Without looking at anything else but the phone, Paul asked tersely, "What do you want?"

"I want to trade your agent for another."

Paul dropped his arm, leaned forward and placed his palms on the conference table again. If his glare had been heated, it would have melted the phone into vapor. "Trade what agent?"

"I want Colin Riley in exchange for Rachel Miles."

Paul bobbed his head as if surprised, but didn't miss a beat. "I don't have

an agent named Colin Riley.”

“But your good friend, Ken Davenport, does. And I know you two were recently working together in St. Louis.”

Paul turned his head and glanced first at Ken and then at Colin before fixing his stare back to the phone. “I’m not authorized to—”

“Stop playing games.” Montoya cut him off. “I’ll call you from this cell phone in an hour with instructions, or else your agent is dead.”

The sharp sound of the whip cracking again and a low animalistic scream punctuated the line before it cut off to blank air.

Paul fisted his hand and pounded the table.

Colin understood his feelings completely.

* * * *

The trade was made along a narrow lonely stretch of old highway along an even older bridge. Paul stood with Ken and Colin at one end of the ramshackle wooden structure. Luis Montoya and several hired guns waited at the other end. Half the length of a football field separated them under a moonless sky.

The darkness made it difficult to see without night vision binoculars.

Paul’s cell phone rang and he put it to his ear without uttering a greeting. He knew who it was. They all did.

“Send Mr. Riley towards us and we’ll release your agent.”

“I want to talk to her.”

Luis laughed. “Fine.”

There was shuffling and Paul heard Rachel’s voice. “Hello,” she whispered.

“Rachel?”

“Please, help me.” She started sobbing and didn’t say anything else coherent. Paul was desperately worried about her health. She’d been in the field too long and overdue for a check up with the Protocol scientists.

Rachel soon exited the van parked across the bridge. She stood on wobbly legs, but someone had covered her head with a burlap sack. Two rough eyeholes had been cut into the tan fabric for her to see, but they weren't large enough that Paul could see her face.

She was dressed in the same clothing as when she'd left St Louis. The man moving her about turned her around and even from this distance Paul could see the three whip marks across her back that had torn viciously through her shirt. He ground his teeth hard enough he was surprised they didn't crack in his mouth.

Beside him Colin tensed.

Paul leaned close and whispered, "Do me a favor. Kill him for me, with my blessing."

"Trust me, I will."

Ken said, "Zack won't make it back in time to back you up, so I've volunteered to do it."

Colin's face registered surprise. "Aren't you a little rusty to be out in the field?"

"I was still in the field five years ago."

"Five years! Good God, you're ancient."

"Shut up. I'll monitor the transceiver devices we've wired you with."

Paul knew that as a former agent, Ken's black ops career was legendary. Colin should be grateful to have Ken back him up in the field.

"Standard issue?"

"A couple are. One's in your ear bud, plus another obvious one in your watch. The third inserted beneath your skin at the wrist is courtesy of the witch doctors in the Protocol Agency."

Colin fisted his hand and rotated his wrist around first clockwise then counterclockwise. "Yeah, it's itched since they put it in."

"Don't scratch. Hopefully, when they scan you and pull the one in your watch they won't look for more in the same area."

"Let's hope. I'd hate to have my wrist slit for removal."

"It's supposed to be undetectable," Ken assured him, although his guarded expression, in Paul's opinion, didn't inspire confidence.

Paul remained silent as Colin and Ken rehearsed various scenarios once he was traded.

“I don’t get why Montoya is risking so much to get to you,” Ken said. “Why wouldn’t he just go on his merry way now that he’s free from the Colombian prison?”

Colin shrugged. “Drug lords take revenge very seriously.” He slid his bulletproof vest on and secured the wide Velcro straps across his torso. “Especially against spies able to infiltrate their ranks for months without being caught.”

Paul wanted his agent back. He wanted Rachel, no, Laurie, back safely in his care. Unimaginable situations like this one was why he harbored well-planned fantasies about murdering Senator Bremer. In his favorite version, he smothered the senator while he slept.

“I’m ready,” Colin glanced at Paul. His eyebrows creased as if unsure why Paul was so worried. “She’ll be back safely in a few minutes.”

Paul cleared his throat. In a quiet voice he said, “I appreciate this, Riley.”

“I’m not doing it for you.”

“I know, but all the same, I thank you.”

He nodded and looked away. “Right.”

Sixty seconds later, Colin headed west along the rickety bleached gray boards of the bridge. Paul watched his progress through his night-vision binoculars. His field of vision, through the specialized lenses, was lit with various shades of green and black. Across the expanse of the bridge, Rachel stumbled forward as well.

Her gait was wobbly at best as she traversed the space. Paul thought she’d drop and stumble to the ground as she made her way across the bridge. But she managed to stay on her feet.

Colin passed her from a width ten feet away as previously arranged. He watched her pass beside him, but she never looked his way. The act of simply putting one foot in front of the other seemed to be all she could handle.

Paul found himself drifting towards her a quarter step at a time wanting to whisk her off to safety and the medical lab as soon as possible.

Across the bridge, Colin was seconds away from Montoya’s men, while

Rachel had a ways to go. He heard her sobbing from fifty feet away as she shuffled slowly along.

The hair on Paul's neck stood up a millisecond before a rifle shot rang out.

A high-powered bullet burst through Rachel's chest. She arched forward with the impact and fell to her knees. Colin was grabbed and shoved into Montoya's van with the side door open and waiting on the other side of the bridge.

Paul screamed, "No!" He lurched forward as she fell face forward into the bridge.

Ken followed at his side with the intent to reach the woman crumpled before them on the bridge. They hadn't gone two steps before the bomb went off detonating the center of the bridge into a million splintery pieces.

Chapter 14

Colin heard the rifle shot and looked back in time to see Rachel fall to her knees. “Bastard,” he screamed.

An instant later, three men jumped out of the panel van and grabbed him. They bound his hands behind his back as Colin fought like a wild animal with vengeance riding his actions. They wrestled him inside the van and drove away.

Cold fury ripped through his soul at the betrayal. The side door slammed shut on the scene followed a few seconds later by the explosion.

The sting of a needle pierced his upper arm before his knees hit the floorboard. His focus went blurry as he balanced so as not to fall on his face.

From the front passenger seat, Luis Montoya looked over his shoulder and said, “Tommy Callahan, so good of you to finally join us. Or should I call you, Mr. Riley?” He laughed lightly, flipped his El Lobo lighter open and lit a fresh cigarette. Snapping the lid shut on the flame, he blew a rush of smoke out into the vehicle’s small space. “I have so many surprises for you.”

Woozy from whatever they’d shot him with, Colin shook his head trying to stay conscious. He lost the battle seconds later and slipped sideways. He smacked his shoulder on the van’s unforgiving metal floorboard adding one more bruise to his growing list of injuries. His last vision was of Luis Montoya laughing. The stench of his second-hand smoke permeated the air in the van and filled his lungs.

Coughing, Colin soon succumbed to the dark world of unconsciousness before uttering the single word reverberating in his brain.

Rachel.

The scent of pine forest combined with the distinct odor of wood smoke greeted Colin when he roused awake sometime later. A breeze brushed across his uncovered flesh and sent a rash of goose bumps along one arm. He opened his

eyes and was greeted by his aching head and a dimly lit room.

Flat on his back, he couldn't see the ceiling for the darkness. He glanced to his right and saw a half open window. Rough-hewn wooden walls in a horizontal pattern suggested he was in a log cabin.

Beyond the brightly colored curtains half hiding dirty panes of glass, Colin saw woods.

Lots of woods.

Where the hell was he?

Memories of the van and Luis Montoya smoking slammed into his foggy mind. Shit. Time to go.

Colin rolled to his feet, but was stopped by the bindings at his wrists and ankles.

Above his head he noticed the handcuffs. He couldn't move his feet either. Beneath his back a familiar soft surface caressed his body. Fuck. He was bound to a bed again.

Beneath the open window he could see the corner of a chair leg in his limited field of vision.

"Hello?"

A shuffling sound greeted him followed by what sounded like moaning.

"Is someone there?"

Yanking on the cuffs any further would be futile and merely chafe his wrists.

His missing watch told him they'd found at least one of the hidden transmitters. Either that or they didn't want him to know how much time had passed since his abduction. His ear bud was gone so that was the second one. He twisted both wrists up to ensure the third transmitter was still there. He didn't see any blood on his hands so he was comforted.

It wasn't long before his recollection of the trade on the bridge surfaced in his mind.

Along with Rachel's murder.

The sharp painful memory of seeing her shot lanced through his conscious. If she'd survived the bullet, had she then lasted through the blast?

Anger raced through his veins at the unfairness. He shook it off. Perhaps she hadn't perished.

Montoya's voice came from out of the darkness. "Ah. I see you are awake." The sound grated on his aching head. Across the room, once he lifted his head, was a shadowy area. Possibly a door?

Colin replied with a question, "Why did you kill her?"

The scent of smoke from Montoya's cigarette reached Colin before he answered. "She betrayed a friend of mine.

"Besides, the whore on the bridge was inconsequential."

Not to me. Colin fought the urge to grind his teeth in frustration. "We traded in good faith. She didn't deserve to die."

"Did you truly expect good faith from me after all your lies?" Luis Montoya emerged from the shadowy darkness and into the meager light amid a swirl of smoke, like the boogiemer from his worst childhood nightmares. The difference was that Colin was too angry to be frightened.

He pulled hard on his cuffs making them rattle against the headboard to punctuate his words. "She had nothing to do with what went on between us in Columbia."

"I beg to disagree. We are here today because of what she did for you in Columbia."

"What?"

"Rachel released you from your bonds. Yes?"

Colin clamped his mouth shut. It was beyond foolish to argue with a psychopath and more so to feed him information.

Montoya approached slowly. "No response. Then you must agree with me. Good."

A thought occurred to Colin. "Was Rachel the blue dress you went looking for after our drink at Ortega's bar?"

"No." Montoya grinned. "She was, what you'd call, my runner up."

Colin didn't acknowledge his light-hearted response. He stared for a few seconds longer then slid his gaze to the window and chair beneath it.

"Now that I know your name isn't Tommy Callahan, I must congratulate

you on an amazing performance during your time with us at the compound in Columbia.”

Colin allowed a smile to form.

“You had me completely fooled. I told my partner you couldn’t possibly be a government agent. I wasn’t convinced even after we arrived in America. Tonight at the exchange on the bridge, I was proven wrong.”

“Partner?” Colin didn’t give a shit about who he was working with, but it was a good idea to keep him talking.

“I’ll let you see for yourself. But first I have a surprise for you.

“Here’s a hint.” Montoya took a couple steps closer to the foot of the bed. In his hand, he held a small piece of paper about the size of a business card.

“Guess where I found this?” He moved along the side of the bed and put the card close to Colin’s face.

“Shit.” Colin stared at his own business card. The one he’d given to Laurie the last time they’d seen each other. The one she’d slid inside her bra.

Montoya laughed and pulled the card away. “I must tell you that I enjoyed removing it very much. She was feisty, at first.”

Colin reacted futilely yanking on his bindings. The pain shooting down his arm from the bite of the handcuff’s metal strengthened his resolve to escape so he could kill Montoya.

Montoya merely smiled. He turned and gestured to the doorway behind him. Leaning down, he snapped on the light next to the bed. The figure in the entryway was not immediately visible.

Colin heard a few shuffling steps and a figure emerged from the darkness. Mussed blonde hair escaping from her ponytail framed her face. Colin’s heart shot to his stomach when he realized that it was Rachel.

She was alive.

A white and red cloth gag ran through her teeth and tied behind her head. A path of dried blood trailed from one side of her nose, over her mouth and soaked into the cotton stuffed between cracked lips. Another nosebleed. Shit. Her eyes were puffy and moist from recently shed tears staining her cheeks.

She was absolutely the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

Colin asked the first stupid question that came into his mind. “Are you okay?” Obviously she wasn’t.

Rachel nodded once. Her focus remained glued on him for only a second before glancing to the left at the open door where Montoya had come through.

She did it again. Was someone else there?

Colin nodded at Rachel and smiled. Without looking at Montoya he said, “Let her go. I’ll cooperate.”

“No. I don’t think so. Chained to the bed as you are, I expect you’ll cooperate regardless. Besides, my partner has changed her mind and wants your woman to stay and watch.”

Colin didn’t want to ask the question, but did anyway. “Watch, what?”

“I believe the main attraction will be your long-awaited seduction.”

He squinted and played along. “My seduction?”

Rachel’s expression became frantic. Her eyes opened wide. She shook her head from side to side.

“You see my partner has had a very focused agenda for the past several months. I, myself, am standing here in your country today because she wants you so desperately.”

Slowly, a slim female shape came into the dim light of the doorway to the room. Her steps made clicking sounds as she crossed the room to the bed. And then he saw her.

Representing his worst nightmare and dressed in a kink-to-the-max outfit complete with studded collar, skin-tight black leather vest and pants, six inch stilettos and coiled whip attached to one hip, Serena Ortega strolled along the side of the bed sporting a sadistic smile.

* * * *

The girl on the bridge was dead. Cold dread circled Paul’s heart replacing the hopeless fear at losing an agent this way, even though he was ninety-nine percent sure the woman they’d traded Colin for wasn’t Rachel.

Paul squatted next to the body. He pulled the burlap from her head and

threw it to the side, making him one hundred percent sure. "It's not her," he said out loud.

Next to him, Ken nodded.

Several strands of long, stringy, dirty-blond hair spilled onto the wooden planks on the bridge. Her emaciated frame carried the now whip-shredded clothing that Rachel had worn in St Louis. Three bright red welts marked her bony back along with the single bullet hole next to her prominent shoulder blade. Her open eyes stare sightlessly past them.

Ken sighed deeply and stared into the darkness towards the other end of the bridge. "When did you know for sure?"

"When I pulled the bag off of her head."

"Bullshit. Even I knew before then. This woman was a walking scarecrow."

"Doesn't matter." Paul stood up. "I didn't know in time to save Colin."

As the pungent stench of thick smoke from the still-burning debris filled his lungs, he heard Ken's phone ring.

Ken answered wearily, "Davenport." He turned his back and launched into a lengthy conversation.

Paul took the opportunity to call Frankie and check up on her progress.

After a half a ring she picked up, "This is Frankie."

"Tell me you have something to go on."

"I do. Based on local maps of the area, I guessed the most likely path to the airport from the mission location. I found an ATM five blocks away with camera footage of Rachel leaving the mission area in the government vehicle you secured. I believe she may have been followed.

"So I ran the license plate of the rental car that followed way too close. Two blocks later Rachel's vehicle should have passed another ATM I had access to, but neither car passed by. The block in between has no discernable camera coverage.

"So using the license plate on the rental car, I identified the rental company and hacked into their files."

"Excellent work." Paul was continually amazed by what Frankie could

accomplish when motivated and left alone to complete her task.

“I almost have the name on the credit card used for the rental.”

“Almost?” Paul tried not to sound ungrateful, but needed results. “When will you have it completely.”

“Soon. It’s a company card. I’m trying to come up with an actual person’s name. It’ll be any second,” Frankie said quickly.

“Good.”

“Is Rachel okay?” Frankie’s worried tone came through the line. He heard the clicking noise of her fingers rapidly typing on a keyboard in the background.

“Don’t know. The trade didn’t go as planned.”

The typing stopped. “Where is she?”

“With the kidnappers wherever they are and they have Colin too. Get that information pronto.”

“Roger that.”

“One more thing.” Paul already knew the answer to the next question but he asked it anyway. “Anyone seen or heard from the driver of Rachel’s government vehicle?”

“No. Nothing. I sent a team to the last known location. I haven’t heard from them yet.”

“Okay. Keep in touch.” Paul severed the connection.

Ken finished his call at the same time. “Zack got the name of who helped Luis Montoya escape. And he has an address for the U.S. contact that shuttled Montoya into the country.”

“Who got him out of prison?”

“Raoul Ortega’s daughter, Serena.”

“How much do you want to bet she’s behind everything?” Paul laughed mirthlessly.

Ken snorted. “Nothing. I’d lose.”

* * * *

"I've waited a very long time to get you in my bed, Tommy." Serena stalked over to Colin as Rachel quietly struggled against her bindings. They were loosened, but far from dropping away to free her hands. Montoya gripped her elbow and pulled her along.

Colin frowned. "I can't imagine why."

The whip hanging on Serena's belt swung back and forth with each step. Rachel wanted to strangle her with it. Her mouth felt like a dust pit from being gagged so long. She'd listened for hours to Serena yammer about all the things she was going to do to 'Tommy' once he was awake.

"Can't you? Let me explain." Serena grabbed his chin between forefinger and thumb. She sporting long blood-red nails and jerked his attention up to her kohl-lined eyes. "No man gets away from me after I have decided that I want him. Not even a spy like you." She pursed her shiny dark lips into a tight 'O' shape and kissed his lips. Colin didn't move.

Serena pulled away a few inches. "You disappointed me, Tommy. I've never understood. Why did you run from me?" She caressed her whip as she spoke.

Colin tugged his chin out of her grasp. "Because I don't fuck crazy women. That's why."

Serena snarled and Rachel thought she would strike him, but she stopped before connecting with his face. "But you will." Leaning in close she whispered, "I can't wait to hear you scream my name." She licked his cheek with the tip of her pierced tongue. Rachel fought the urge to cross the room and rip Serena's tongue from her crazy mouth.

"Serena. Time wastes." Montoya spoke. Rachel got the impression from his tone that he was impatient. She'd covertly listened to their conversation since before Colin had been brought here.

Serena was crazy, single-minded in her quest to get Colin in her bed for some blood sport.

The worst part was when they'd tortured the poor girl from Salerno's apartment. Under threat of killing the frightened girl housed with her, Rachel had volunteered a few names along with the phone number to the black ops building switchboard. Using Rachel's Protocol issued cell phone, they'd called the

headquarters command center and whipped the girl to set up the trade for Colin.

From their conversations she understood that Montoya was in a precarious position. Serena had helped him escape from prison and he was now obligated. However, now that he was free and long gone from Columbia, it didn't sound like he wanted to help her any longer.

"Think a moment," Montoya pleaded. "His fellow agents are surely looking for them."

"You said you removed both transmitters. Stop being foolish."

Montoya released Rachel's arm, crossed the room in two strides to stub out his cigarette on the stone mantle and threw it into the small, unlit fireplace built into the corner. "They are not to be trusted. We should leave them both here to die and escape while we can."

"I pay you to do my bidding, Luis. Not the other way around. I want him and I'll have him. Tonight. All night."

Rachel seethed with anger. All this because some crazy bitch wanted sex? A powerful need to protect Colin enveloped her. She pulled at the ropes behind her back, hoping that they were truly loosening.

"What about her?" Montoya looked across the room and the two of them turned to stare. Rachel stopped moving.

Serena grinned maniacally. "Leave her. She can watch."

The first time Rachel and Colin had met, he'd been bound to a bed in Columbia because of Serena Ortega. They'd come full circle strangely enough.

Colin turned away from Serena and pegged Rachel with a concerned stare. He scanned her face probably seeing the bloody nose. Serena had struck her earlier to gain her cooperation with the cell phone calls. She'd started out with sarcasm and bravado then slowly pretended to crumble after repeated threats of violence.

After spending a few quality hours with Serena, Rachel was glad she'd saved Colin in Columbia, even though it hadn't been part of her mission. She needed to find a way to save him again tonight. And herself.

Pulling earnestly on the ropes securing her wrists, she vowed to stop Serena. Whatever it took.

* * * *

“Luis, put her in the chair. She’ll have a ringside seat.”

Colin had lost his shirt sometime while he was unconscious. Resting on top of the bedding, he rattled the handcuffs and experienced an evil sense of *deja vu*. Trapped.

Serena climbed on the bed and straddled his hips. Colin tried to buck her off but he lacked the movement needed. She ground her crotch over his groin and laughed. “Are you so anxious to fuck me?”

“Not even close.”

“Are you enjoying the view, precious.” Serena called out to Rachel. “Perhaps you can jot down a few notes on how to fuck a man properly.” She leaned down and licked Colin’s chest.

“You disgust me. Put your nasty tongue back in your mouth. Your breath stinks as bad as the rest of you.”

Serena grabbed his chin with thumb and forefinger. “Behave. Or I’ll punish the little quivering bitch over there. Nothing will stop me from having you this time.” She glanced over at Rachel now seated in the chair next to the window.

Colin mentally sighed. “Just let us go.”

Flipping her hair back she shook her head back and forth. “Not until I’m satisfied.” She reached both hands to his belt and worked to unbuckle it.

“I don’t want you, Serena.” Colin wished logic wasn’t a useless practice. “I never wanted you.”

“I don’t care.” She stopped tugging at his jeans and slapped his face.

The sting across his cheek only fueled his anger. “You’re wasting your time. Get off of me.”

Serena’s shiny blood-red lips puckered into an asshole shape. She squinted and leaned over putting her mouth inches from his face. “I’ll suck your cock until you’re hard and ready to burst for me.”

“That just makes you a cocksucker. I’m not interested.” Colin rested his head back on the pillow and for the first time in his life wished his dick would remain flaccid. He didn’t want Serena’s mouth anywhere near his cock.

“Liar.” Serena grinned and unzipped his pants and the faint stirrings of his cock coming to life made him want to vomit. “You’ll beg me to finish sucking on you once I’ve started.”

“Trust me, I won’t beg you for anything, you sick bitch.” He closed his eyes unwilling to watch.

Having Rachel watch another woman suck his dick until the crazy bitch got him hard so she could then rape him was about the worst thing he could dream up.

Unfortunately, no matter how much he didn’t want Serena, having any woman’s mouth on his cock was going to have an expected result.

And no amount of baseball statistics running through his mind would prevent the physical aspects any blowjob would produce, even an unwanted one.

Chapter 15

Since being abducted, Rachel had put on what she considered an Oscar-worthy performance for Serena and Montoya.

After briefly starting out as brave in the face of torture, she'd then met each threat with tearful resignation and did her very best to appear weak and beaten over each request they demanded. They were fools to ever believe she was fragile.

Seated primly in her chair, arms bound behind her, Rachel glanced at Colin. He was flat on his back on the bed bound exactly as he had been in Columbia. They'd cut his shirt off before they'd secured him to the bed.

Serena was currently astride him licking his chest and unzipping his pants. Suppressing a feral growl, Rachel crunched her bound hands into fists and prepared to surprise her captors. The ropes were nearly loosened, but Montoya stood too close. She didn't want him to hear her.

"Should I call you Tommy, or should I call you Colin?"

"Either way you're wasting your time."

As if he hadn't spoken, she said, "Hmm...I like Tommy better."

Colin's head lifted from the pillow and he sneered at her. "Should I call you Crazy Bitch or Crazy Whore? Hmm...I like both equally well."

Rachel could see Serena's spine stiffen. Montoya moved away from her a few steps so she tugged at her restraints with gusto.

"Before tonight is over you will beg me to fuck you, Tommy!" Serena grew angrier as each second passed.

Colin beautifully fanned the flames of her insanity with each word he spoke in defiance. "I'll beg you to bring me a barf bag first." Colin's teeth were gritted tight as he spoke.

Serena's shrill scream of rage startled Montoya. He stepped closer to the bed and cleared his throat.

"If you don't need me, I'll be in the other room."

Serena turned startled as if she'd forgotten he was in the room. "No. Stay and keep an eye on the kitten."

The ropes binding Rachel loosened a little further as Montoya said quietly, "I don't particularly want to watch you fuck him, Serena."

"Are you jealous?" Serena abandoned her unbuttoning task and straightened her spine. She turned to face him as a sly smile washed over her crimson lips.

Montoya sighed deeply and the ropes binding Rachel fell away.

She was free.

Rachel stood up ready to kick some ass. Both Montoya and Serena turned their attention to her. She advanced a step towards them before realizing that her ties had merely widened a few more inches.

She was *not* free.

"Did you want to join us, precious?" Serena taunted.

Montoya turned and reached out to grab her shoulders. Rachel launched forward aiming her head for the center of his face.

The sickening crunch of his nose breaking rang across the room when her forehead connected. He grunted and crumbled to his knees as blood spattered on the wooden floor at her feet. His hands went to his face.

Rachel stepped back and kicked her heel into the side of his head. When he slumped to the floor, she stormed past and headed for the bed and her next target, Serena.

"Luis!" Serena bounded off the bed as Rachel approached it. Serena glanced at Montoya now 'resting' on the rug at the foot of the bed. "What have you done?"

The gag prevented Rachel from answering. Serena reached for the whip attached to her belt. Rachel kicked her hand as hard as she could. The whip tumbled to the floor as Serena shrieked and hunched over cradling her hand. Rachel had no sympathy and kicked her in the stomach. Serena went to her knees with a thud.

Rachel kned her in the face. Serena dodged the blow intended for her nose, but caught a kneecap to the jaw. The impact might not have knocked her out, but smacking the side of her head on the wooden post at the corner of the bed did. She slid to the floor at the foot of the bed several feet from where Montoya was.

“Damn,” Colin said under his breath from the bed.

Rachel looked up from the two prone bodies to see his grin. She tried to smile in return, but the gag was a bothersome reminder of her ordeal. It had been in her mouth since they’d taken her. She needed a knife to release her bonds.

“Now what, my wonderful warrior princess?”

Where was a sharp object that she could use to cut away her ropes? Glancing around the bedroom of the hunting lodge, Rachel saw absolutely nothing.

“I still have a knife under my belt buckle if it would help you, darlin’.” Colin inclined his head toward his belt and smiled as if he knew he’d read her mind.

Rachel nodded and climbed awkwardly onto the bed. She knew she needed to hurry, as she didn’t expect Serena or Montoya would remain unconscious for long.

Hands tied behind her, Rachel scooted backwards awkwardly onto the bed and patted around for Colin’s belt buckle knife. Her hands bumbled across his thigh and she accidentally grabbed his crotch.

“Whoa, let’s save that for later.” Colin’s hips lifted and twisted until she felt the belt buckle at her fingertips. After further maneuvering she managed to dislodge it. She removed herself carefully from the bed, went to her knees on the hardwood floor, wedged the knife between her heels and gracelessly sawed at her bonds. With every slice of the ropes she managed to nick one of her hands.

On the other side of the bed, Rachel heard Montoya beginning to stir. She ducked down and looked under the bed. He wasn’t moving yet. She straightened and stepped up her efforts jabbing the knife tip into a knuckle twice more.

The sting of the blade hitting her flesh didn’t slow her down. Her arms ached from being behind her back for so long. It was difficult to press them into service even at the lure of freedom. At last, she severed a rope that loosened her restraints. She tugged, cutting off the circulation further until one hand broke free

from the bonds.

“Rachel?” Colin whispered from above. She was out of his line of sight. She kept an eye on Montoya and stood as the ropes from her wrists fell to the floor. She used the knife to cut off the gag. Spitting cotton fibers out, she threw the saliva soaked rag to the floor with the ropes. She stood up.

“Miss me?” she asked Colin in a whisper. He grinned and nodded.

Rachel resisted the urge to kiss his mouth. Instead, she climbed onto the foot of the bed and sawed at the ropes at his ankles. The first one came undone before Montoya woke up. She scrambled to the other side of the bed and went to work on the other ankle. The top of Montoya’s head became visible when he sat up.

“Serena?” Montoya’s broken nose made his voice sound like he had a cold.

Colin’s ropes were being stubborn. Rachel searched the room for another weapon.

Montoya crawled on hands and knees toward Serena still prone on the floor. His hand landed onto the quilt and he leveraged his body up from the ground. In his other hand he held a gun. He pointed it at Rachel’s head.

“Stop what you are doing,” he commanded as his bloody nose dripped on the bed quilt.

Rachel ignored him and worked even faster cutting through another rope until Montoya cocked the hammer of the pistol.

She stopped cutting and scrambled backwards off the bed onto the other side. The width of a king-sized bed separated them and it simply wasn’t distant enough to render the gun useless. If he pulled the trigger, he’d hit her.

Rachel licked her cracked lips. “Let us go and you’ll have a good head start to get away.”

“No. This I can not do.” He sniffed and his face winced in pain. The gun shook in his fingers. Rachel was about to launch across the bed and knock the gun out of his hand, but something grabbed her ankle.

“I’ll kill you, bitch,” Serena’s fury made her voice sound like it came from the depths of hell.

Rachel turned to kick Serena’s hand off her ankle when she heard

Montoya fire a shot.

* * * *

Colin watched the events around the bed as if in slow motion. He pulled hard on the ropes that Rachel had started cutting through and miraculously he snapped free in time to kick the gun Montoya held. The shot went into the ceiling. Rachel ducked to the floor out of his sight.

Arms tightly handcuffed to the headboard, Colin wished for another miracle. If Montoya aimed and fired at him, he'd be dead.

Montoya dropped his arm and rounded the corner of the bed towards Serena and Rachel. Colin couldn't see either of them, but heard scratching and scuffling on the floor.

"Let go," Serena screeched.

"Shut up. Don't move or I'll cut your face." Rachel stood and pulled Serena up by her hair keeping her in front as a shield from Montoya's gun.

Colin's buckle knife, clutched in Rachel's fist, slid from Serena's cheek to her throat.

Rachel nodded once at Montoya. "Unlock Colin's handcuffs or I put this psycho bitch out of my misery."

"No, don't let him go. I want him." Serena shook her head until Rachel pushed the blade into her flesh. A runnel of blood accompanied her shriek and she stopped struggling.

Rachel tightened her grip on Serena's hair pulling her head back and exposing her throat.

"Drop the gun, Montoya. I'm not kidding."

The loud clunk of Montoya's pistol hitting the wood floor was a welcome sound.

"Unlock him." Rachel pierced Montoya with a positively demonic glare. "Now!"

Montoya sighed through his mouth as his broken nose had swollen his cheeks to the point that his nose almost disappeared into his face. If it weren't for

the flat nostrils, he'd look like he lacked a nose. Shuffling around the bed he reached inside his coat pocket and retrieved a set of keys.

The welcome click of an open handcuff was the best sound he'd heard today.

"Give me the key," Colin held out his freed hand. Montoya dropped the handcuff key into the center of his palm and stepped back.

Twisting to reach the final restraint, Colin maneuvered it until the lock clicked open and he was free.

Colin bounded off the bed towards Montoya. He reached down and grabbed the gun resting where Montoya had dropped it. He motioned Montoya with the gun, "Handcuff yourself to the bed."

Montoya's shoulders slumped. Without further protest, he ambled over to the bed, sat down on the edge and snapped one wrist into the closest handcuff attached to the headboard.

Gun pointed at Montoya's forehead, Colin checked to ensure that the restraint was secure. He turned to Rachel and saw Serena's rage radiating off her body in waves. He didn't want to point a gun in Rachel's direction but felt it was warranted.

"Now you, Serena. Your turn to be handcuffed to a bed."

Her sneer didn't move him to leniency. Rachel swung her prisoner around and pushed her towards the headboard and the waiting handcuff.

In a flash, Serena shoved both of Rachel's shoulders backwards forcing her to lose her balance. She fell backwards. Colin leveled the gun to shoot but hesitated. In slow motion, he watched the two women stagger towards the footboard and the waiting post.

The sickening thud of Rachel's head striking the bed's solid wood frame echoed to his bones.

"Rachel!" Colin screamed her name and hoped her injury wasn't as bad as it had sounded.

Serena bounced away as Rachel slid slowly to the floor. She looked down at where Rachel had fallen and drew back her leg as if to kick her. Colin didn't hesitate. Leveling the gun, he pulled the trigger. He kept pulling it until four holes appeared in Serena's chest. He might have emptied the gun into her but she fell

out of his line of sight.

“Serena!” Montoya shouted.

Colin ignored him and hurried around the foot of the bed.

Rachel lay motionless on her side. Squatting, he brushed the hair from her face and carefully probed her scalp. The knot was big but not bleeding. He ran his fingers along her jaw, checked her pulse and found it beating fairly strong.

The blank stare in her open eyes confirmed Serena was dead. He checked the pulse at Serena’s neck and felt nothing.

“Is Serena dead?” Montoya asked.

Colin raised up and caught his gaze. “Yes.”

He nodded. “There is a vehicle outside,” Montoya’s quiet voice intruded on his worry.

“Where are we?” Colin scanned the room for weapons or anything that would help him.

“Salerno’s hunting lodge somewhere in northern Georgia.”

“How far to the nearest hospital?”

“There is a small town at the base of the road leading up here. It’s less than an hour away.”

Colin slid his arms under Rachel’s back and knees to lift her into his arms. She moaned and stirred a little. He took it as a good sign and made his way quickly to the front door. He opened it one-handed as he cradled Rachel in his arms and stepped out onto the creaky porch.

Light from the hunting lodge spilled far enough for Colin to see a pathway of tiles at the bottom of the porch steps leading into the darkness. He hugged Rachel closer and gingerly climbed down the few stairs to the dirt path scanning the surrounding area for a vehicle or garage.

The sound of an approaching vehicle motor stopped him dead in his tracks. Friend or foe, someone was approaching quickly. He didn’t see any headlights, but figured he had about three seconds before the imminent arrival.

Colin shifted Rachel higher in his arms and took a sharp right off the path and headed to the side of the porch. A large squaring shape loomed before him and Colin figured he’d found the vehicle Montoya had referred to. Ducking out of

sight near the front bumper, Colin squatted to watch and see who approached.

“Colin?” Rachel’s faint voice murmured from his shoulder. “What’s happened? Where are we?”

“Shh, darlin’, someone’s coming.”

“My head hurts.” She sniffed once. He hoped she didn’t have a nosebleed to accompany the pain in her head.

“I know. We’re headed for a doctor as soon as I know we’re safe.” In the darkness, he aimed a kiss towards her brow. Bussing her cheek, he sent up a prayer for a rescue. If the transmitter that still itched was working, his team couldn’t be far behind.

“I love you.” She kissed his neck and burrowed her face into his shoulder.

Colin smiled, hugged her lightly and managed to kiss her forehead this time. “I love you, too.”

Tonight marked the second time she’d saved him from Serena Ortega.

The roar of the engine grew louder and Colin saw a vehicle swing towards the hunting lodge with only its parking lights on. He didn’t know how the driver could see to maneuver but the vehicle came to a stop several yards from the porch of the cabin. Another truck with headlights bouncing over the rough terrain pulled in behind the first one.

Colin saw a gun exit the driver’s side door of the first vehicle before the driver. The passenger door swung open and it sounded like someone emerged.

The driver’s door remained open, but the driver didn’t emerge. Colin took this to mean these were not friends of Montoya’s or Serena’s.

A lone figure appeared at the base of the stairs, leading his way up with a rifle he stepped onto the porch. The light from the cabin lit up his face. It was Ken.

“Here,” Colin called. Ken’s weapon swung in his direction and a flashlight beam came on and lit up the fender of the car he hid next to. He tightened his grip on Rachel and stood.

Ken’s weapon lowered and his relieved voice came through the darkness. “Good to see you.”

“I need medical.” Colin carried her towards the vehicle as Ken retreated off the porch and followed.

Ken asked, "Any threats inside I need to worry about?"

"Serena Ortega is dead. Luis Montoya is handcuffed to the headboard in the bedroom. I didn't see anyone else."

Paul jumped out of the driver's door. The first question out of his mouth was, "Is she alive?"

Colin tightened his grip. "Yes."

"Is she shot?" Brows wrinkled, Paul approached. His concern focused on Rachel's face. "We heard gunfire when we approached."

"No. She hit her head. She's got a goose egg, but it isn't bleeding. She says her head hurts, not surprisingly."

Rachel shifted in his arms, gifted him with a wide smile and turned towards Paul who approached at a fast clip. A relieved expression shifted his face into an unusual calm countenance. One that Colin hadn't seen before. Paul showing a softer side towards his agent? Shocking.

Paul nodded once, put a hand on her shoulder and asked her, "How bad does your head hurt?"

Rachel hugged Colin's neck tighter. She turned and glanced at him with a puzzled expression. She looked back at Paul. "I'm sorry. Do we know each other?"

* * * *

Paul felt his eyebrows go skyward when she spoke.

Holy shit. She didn't know him.

Rachel had never flipped into her other personality without help from the Protocol scientists. It was listed as a worst-case scenario in the handbook.

Plastering a fake grin on his face he quickly dropped his hand from her and said, "I'm a co-worker of Colin's. I'm in medical. So I'll be taking you to the hospital."

"I want Colin to come with me. Okay?" She currently had a stranglehold on Riley's neck.

“Sure.” Paul slid a measured look Colin’s way. “He can come with you for now.”

She smiled and snuggled even closer. “Can you call my aunt? I don’t want her to worry.”

“Sure. I’ll take care of it.”

Colin sent a questioning look his way. He opened his mouth to speak further, but Paul shook his head. No need to disturb her now. Besides, he didn’t know what would happen if they referred to her as Rachel.

It might incite a nosebleed or worse.

“Right this way.” Paul led them to the second vehicle, a van equipped with needed Protocol medical supplies. The back space had been turned into an ambulance of sorts. He ordered the protocol scientist he’d brought with him to fix her up with an IV for fluids along with a code to sedate her quickly.

Colin laid her on the field gurney. They loaded her inside and he climbed into the van to hold her hand while a technician checked her over. The tech did a rudimentary physical and set her up with an IV. Seconds after the needle was inserted in her arm, she closed her eyes. Colin assumed she was knocked out.

Paul whipped his head around to stare at him. “What happened to her? Start at the beginning and tell me everything you know.”

Colin watched Laurie and sighed deeply. He cleared his throat and spoke, “Once I got into the van at the bridge, Montoya tranquilized me. I didn’t see Rachel until I woke up here.”

“Was she Rachel or Laurie then?”

“Rachel. She fooled Luis and Serena into believing she was overly upset and weak. Thinking she wasn’t a threat, she caught them off guard and beat the shit out of both of them before releasing me from my bonds.

“She hit the back of her head against the bed post fighting with Serena.”

“Then she woke up as Laurie?”

“I think so. She called me by name, but both personalities know me. I didn’t realize she was Laurie until she didn’t recognize you.” He shrugged. “What will happen to her?”

Paul shook his head. “I wish I knew. I’ve never seen an agent switch personalities like this. I’m in uncharted territory here. Once we get her back to

Protocol headquarters and the scientists evaluate her, we'll know more."

"You aren't going to keep us apart." Colin clutched her limp hand. It wasn't a question. The worry etched in his face was genuine.

Paul sighed deeply before answering, "No. I may need you if she wakes up as Laurie again. Go and debrief Ken. She'll be unconscious for the trip back to DC." Paul pulled a card out of his pocket. "Here's my private card. Call me once you're free and I'll get you access to the Protocol main labs."

Colin took the card and sent her another angst-filled look. "I love her."

"Oh? Which one, Rachel or Laurie?"

"Both." With one last loving glance at her face, Colin exited the van to ride with Ken.

Paul watched his agent's peaceful face. Rachel or Laurie, he wondered who would wake up next.

Chapter 16

Colin took the stairs leading to the Protocol Agency's main lab two at a time. He'd told Ken every detail he remembered about his abduction and documented it in his official report. The second he was finished, he called Paul to find out how Rachel was doing. Or was it Laurie? He didn't know who to be worried about, probably both, given the odd circumstances of their existence.

There had been no change in her condition, but Paul had asked him to come. Colin found Paul's new more tolerant feelings a welcome surprise considering his previous and repeated threats to keep them apart. He hoped Paul's improved attitude would last.

Rounding the corner towards a hallway leading to a reception area off the stairway, he saw Paul waiting for him.

Arms crossed, sporting a grim expression, Paul Kelly was an imposing figure. At least for some, not for Colin. With a scowl, he glanced at the clock hanging on the wall and back at Colin as if he were late. He wasn't.

"Thanks for letting me come to see her." Colin wanted to start off on a good note.

"She hasn't woken up yet." Paul turned and walked to a door next to the reception desk. He put his palm on the reader and leaned in so the retinal scan could identify him. The door clicked open and together they strolled into a long white corridor.

Once through the security door, Paul added, "There have been some complications."

"What complications? Is she going to be okay?" A streak of fear went through to his soul.

Paul tilted his head back and stretched his neck before answering. "She has a concussion. The scientists don't know what impact it will have on the

Protocol implants already in place in her head.”

“Implants? Sounds like a nefarious science fiction movie. How does the whole Protocol Agency implant thing work anyway? If you don’t mind my asking?”

“I do mind,” Paul said and pierced him with a narrow-eyed disgruntled look. After a few seconds he sighed and continued, “but since you already know the biggest secret regarding her two personalities, I guess I can share a few things with you.

“The Protocol Agency is essentially an experiment in manufactured spies. I won’t bore you with the historical or scientific details, but suffice it to say that individuals who met certain limited criteria were introduced into the program.

“Our candidates were set up into the stable environment of a simple, quiet life. We hired retired government agents to act as live-in handlers, for lack of a better term.”

“Like Laurie’s aunt?”

“Yes. Fiona isn’t her biological aunt, she just pretends for the purposes of the Protocol Agency. Fiona’s primary function is to manage Laurie’s daily life with regard to mission departures and returns. Along with that, she’s supposed to keep unwanted relationships in check.”

Colin smiled. “I don’t think Laurie ever told her about me.”

Paul shook his head and glanced at the ceiling. “There are many things both Rachel and Laurie failed to share with regard to you. The problem is that she doesn’t meet the minimum criteria for insertion into the Protocol program.”

Colin huffed. “Then why did you recruit her?”

“I didn’t,” Paul grated out. “She was brought in and trained without my knowledge in a separate facility. Trust me, if I’d known, I would have stopped it. But by the time I found out, she was fully integrated in the program. It was too late.”

“Why didn’t you just kick her out?” Colin asked.

Paul rolled his eyes. “Lots of reasons.”

“Name one.”

Paul drew in a deep breath and sighed heavily. “I wasn’t able to remove her because a certain Senator with a grudge against me insists she remain in the

program. The nature of the Protocol Agency makes it impossible for her to just exit the program on a whim. There are particular training protocols that are ingrained into her mind along with the implants and she must be monitored. I've done my best to protect her by only sending her on selective missions, but even that was a strain. My complaints over her inabilities have fallen on deaf ears.

"Ultimately, the certain Senator overseeing the project told me that I wasn't in the position to scrap a multi-million dollar program for my own personal reasons."

"Not even for the health of one of your agents?"

Paul closed his eyes and opened them quickly again. "No. Not even for that. I thought I could shield her. Obviously, I've failed. However, if I were to quit or get myself kicked off the project then someone else would instantly replace me. The Senator in charge would then be able to dictate that Rachel go on every available mission regardless of her mental or physical state.

"I can't count on my successor being more lenient than I already am with regard to Laurie's special predicament."

"Why does this *certain* Senator want her in the Protocol Agency program in the first place?"

"He's a vengeful bastard."

Colin laughed. "What's Senator Bremer got on you?"

If Paul was surprised over Colin's knowledge of who his funding was overseen by he didn't show it. Ken had shared his limited knowledge during the recent debriefing.

Paul took a deep breath and after a very long pregnant pause he said, "A long time ago, when I was young and stupid, I got involved with Senator Bremer's daughter. I didn't know who she was at the time. I just knew that she intrigued me.

"Jessica was something special and for some reason she sought me out. She chased me from the get go.

"The senator told her I was unacceptable and demanded she stop seeing me or he'd discontinue funding her lavish lifestyle. I expected her to leave me. Unfortunately, as it turned out, she rebelled. She quit college and gave up her rich life to live with me and it led to her death."

Colin asked, "What happened?"

"The case I was working went south and the guy we were after got my personal information and came after me. He found Jessica at our apartment first and killed her before I made it home.

"The Senator blamed me. And I blamed myself. If it weren't for our relationship, his daughter would still be alive."

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

Paul shrugged.

"How long ago did this happen?"

"Fifteen years ago."

"Time to move on, don't you think?"

He nodded in Laurie's direction. "She's been occupying my full attention."

"Well, now she'll occupy *my* full attention." Colin smiled.

They'd covered the distance of the long hallway to another door. Paul repeated his palm and retina scan to gain access. Once inside it was as if they'd stepped into a hospital ward.

A nurses station was on the left manned by several men and women all dressed in white lab coats over green surgical scrubs. Paul led him past the desk and turned down a short hallway.

Glass-walled rooms lined either side of the hall. The antiseptic smell was like every hospital he'd ever visited. Even with his eyes closed he would know he was in a hospital of some sort simply by breathing in.

There were no other patients until they got to Laurie's room at the end. She rested peacefully in a narrow hospital bed propped up as if she'd merely dozed off. A white coated attendant checked various machines around her as they watched.

"Can I go in?"

"In a minute. I thought we could talk some more first."

"Is this where you ask me my intentions?"

Paul continued to stare through the glass and a light smile lifted the corner

of his mouth. "Something like that."

"I already confessed my love for her. Do you want a signed statement in my blood?" Colin placed his palm on the glass and leaned his forehead on the back of his hand.

A long sigh erupted from Paul. "What if I told you she can't support two personalities? What if we had to choose either Rachel or Laurie?" He turned a piercing glare Colin's way.

"Is that a real possibility or just conjecture to scare me?"

Paul laughed mirthlessly and turned to watch through the glass. "The scientists tell me that given her history over the past several months that it is a real possibility. Scaring you is just a bonus.

"We don't even know which personality she's going to wake up with next. That's the only reason I invited you along today."

"I should have known that I wasn't here out of the goodness of your heart."

"A relationship complicates her already complex life with our group. There is a reason we don't allow boyfriends into the mix. You may have caused irreparable damage as it is."

"I don't want to hurt her. I want to make a life with her."

Paul laughed out loud. "I can't imagine that will be possible."

"Impossible or not, I'm not abandoning her."

Colin watched as the woman he loved stirred in the bed. The monitor next to her beeped a rapid staccato of blips and the attendant inside ran around the foot of the bed to check the screen.

Rachel, or maybe Laurie, bolted upright in bed and screamed, "Colin!"

* * * *

Rachel woke with a headache throbbing in her brain before she even opened her eyes. Her first thought beyond the pain was of Colin. Where was he?

As a matter of fact, where was she?

Opening her eyes, she noted the hospital surroundings first. She shot up into a sitting position and shrieked his name at the top of her lungs.

The attendant pushing buttons on a piece of machinery next to her bed jumped and dropped his metal clipboard. Across the room through the glass wall, she saw Paul and Colin watching. Then they both scrambled to her bedside.

Colin grabbed her hand. "How are you, darlin'? I've been worried."

She squeezed his fingers linking her fingers through his to hold him in place. Putting the other hand to her head, she struggled to keep her brain from trying to burst out of her forehead. "I have a headache that has surpassed the worst possible migraine level. Otherwise, I'm okay."

Both men looked at her expectantly. No one said anything. She wondered why Colin was allowed to be by her side, but was glad he was here.

"What's wrong? Why are you staring at me like that?"

Paul cleared his throat. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Rachel scrunched her forehead. "I was in a cabin somewhere and I fought with Serena Ortega because she had Colin handcuffed to another bed.

"She pushed me into the bed post and then it was lights out for me. That's probably why I have such a wicked headache."

Paul nodded but the concern remained etched in his face. It was uncharacteristic for him to be so concerned. Maybe he was mad that she let herself be captured by them in the first place.

"What are you mad about? It wasn't the driver's fault we got run off the road. The tires were shot out and the vehicle was taken over quickly. Then they shot me with a tranquilizer. I woke up at the cabin. A few hours later they brought Colin in, also out cold, and tied him to the bed. When he woke up, I kicked some ass."

Paul smiled and nodded, which confused her. He was never this calm. He was acting very strangely.

"I'm not mad. I just want you to recover."

Rachel turned to Colin. "What happened after I passed out? She didn't use the whip on you, did she?"

"No. She tried to kick you while you were down so I shot her. She's dead."

“And Montoya?”

Colin smiled. “He’s in custody.”

Rachel turned to Paul. “What happened to the driver in Chicago? He tried to protect me before I got tranquilized.”

“We found him in the trunk of the vehicle. He was shot in the chest.” Paul frowned.

“Is he dead?” Rachel remembered how hard the driver had fought to keep her safe. Unfortunately, they’d been out-manned, out-gunned and ultimately overpowered.

“No. He’s in intensive care, but he’s expected to make it.”

“Good. Then all is right with the world. Dope me up with some pain meds and I’ll be good to go.”

Paul smiled again. His calm attitude was unnerving. “We have a few tests yet to run. You smacked your head pretty hard.”

Rachel shrugged. “Fine.”

Colin brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. “Thanks for helping me escape from Serena’s evil clutches again.”

“Sure.” She would have said more, but Paul interrupted, “Why don’t you close your eyes and rest up? We’ll be right outside your door.”

She nodded but the movement was too much. It felt like her brain was sloshing around loose in her head. Closing her eyes, she squeezed Colin’s hand one last time and released it.

Someday soon when her head wasn’t in such pain, she would demand that Paul let her see Colin. She loved him.

It shouldn’t be such a big deal for them to have a relationship on the side.

Not to mention that they made one hell of a team.

* * * *

“She was Rachel this time,” Colin said under his breath once they were out of her room.

Paul nodded and motioned the guy in the white coat to follow them out.

“What did you do to make her come back as Rachel, Dr. Denton?”

The guy’s eyes widened. “Nothing. She’s switching back and forth on her own. There’s no way to predict who she’ll be any time she rouses.”

Paul’s hand wiped down his face. “Have you given her anything for the pain?”

“We don’t know what impact it will have. We don’t want to make her condition worse.”

Colin frowned. “That’s barbaric. She shouldn’t have to suffer.”

Dr. Denton huffed. “And if we give her a strong narcotic pain medication she might drift into a coma and never come out.”

“Give her something non-narcotic then.” Paul threw his hands up. “What’s the problem?”

“Senator Bremer. He wants her put back into the program as soon as possible. He specifically insisted I not risk a coma. He doesn’t want to risk losing her as an agent.”

Paul’s face blossomed red instantly. He grabbed the front of the doctor’s shirt and stuck his face close. “You answer to me, not him!”

“I answer to both of you.” The doctor’s face reached an ugly shade of purple.

Paul leaned even closer. “Then grow some balls and tell the senator that she’s too sick to continue as an agent.”

“I like my job and Senator Bremer pays for everything.”

“You’re a doctor first. Don’t you have an oath?”

“I’m technically a scientist, not a medical doctor. I won’t do anything to risk her overall health, but I will push the boundaries.”

Colin wanted to clean the doctor’s clock. From the look on Paul’s face, he’d certainly help.

“What’s it going to take to get her out of the Protocol Agency?”

Dr. Denton’s smug expression said nothing was going to get her out of the Protocol Agency. Colin was back to planning a fistfight but someone called the

doctor from down the hall.

Another guy in a white lab coat approached from the direction of the nurses' station and handed Dr. Denton a sheaf of papers. He ignored Paul's question to study the papers in his hand. His eyes widened as if in utter shock.

"Doctor? What is it?" Paul prompted.

"We have another problem."

Colin didn't want to hear about anything other than Rachel getting some pain medication. "Now what?"

"We ran some other standard tests and came across something unexpected. You might just get your wish to have her removed from the Protocol Agency after all."

Paul shot Colin a look of speculative interest and asked, "Good. Tell me how."

The doctor sent a stern gaze to Colin. "She's pregnant."

* * * *

Eyes wide, Colin sucked in a sharp breath and bent at the waist, slapping a hand to his midsection. Thus he missed it when Paul fisted his hand and took a step in his direction to deliver a sound blow to his jaw. Paul only stopped because the part about having Laurie removed from the Protocol Agency finally registered.

Balled up fist leading the way, he paused and asked, "Does that mean she's out of the program?"

Dr. Denton frowned, dropped his eyes to the papers in his hand and fidgeted in his place before answering, "Yes. I guess it does."

"And Senator Bremer won't be able to interfere?"

"No." Dr. Denton's whole body shrunk down. Paul knew he hated to disappoint the senator. Shaking his head, the doctor retreated into Rachel's room without saying anything else.

Colin blew out the deep breath he'd been holding, straightened his spine and cautiously eyed Paul's fist hanging in the air.

Paul dropped his hand and unclenched his fist. "I should kick your ass for getting my niece pregnant, but I owe you big for getting her out of the Protocol program."

Colin's mouth fell open in shock. "She's your niece?" His hand went to his midsection again and rubbed like he had a sudden ulcer erupt in his gut.

Paul nodded and glanced back into her room. "My older sister and her husband died in a car accident when she was five. I was her only surviving relative.

"Twenty some years ago, I wasn't in any position to care for her. So with the money from her parents' generous life insurance policy, I put her in a very expensive private boarding school. Several years ago a private detective hired by Senator Bremer found her, recruited her, trained her for the Protocol Agency and pretty much made my life a living hell from that point forward. He called it retribution."

Dr. Denton exited Rachel's room. "Her vital signs are weakening. We need to get the Protocol implants out soon. You understand that she'll most likely lose all the extensive training we've put her through."

"I don't care. I have other agents. She was never supposed to be in this program in the first place and you know it. Now take care of her."

"Will you sign the paperwork?"

"Yes." *Hallelujah*. Paul wanted to do a dance.

"And you'll be the one to deal with Senator Bremer?"

Damn it. "Of course."

"Once we remove the implants there is no guarantee she'll recover fully." Dr. Denton didn't look him in the eye.

Colin asked, "But what will happen if you don't take them out?"

"My best guess is that she'll flip back and forth from one personality to another indefinitely. Her mental health will suffer. Plus, the pregnancy and all the accompanying hormones in her system will further her unpredictability."

"Will she remember anything from her spy training once the Protocol implants are gone?"

"It's possible residual memories may surface from time to time. It's best to tell her they are just dreams."

“Can I say good bye to her?” Colin asked.

Dr. Denton shrugged. “Hurry up.”

* * * *

Rachel woke when Colin sat down on her hospital bed. He had an odd look on his face.

“What’s up?”

“The doctors out there are plotting some minor surgery for you so your head won’t hurt so bad.”

She smiled and wished they could get some time alone. “I have a home cure for what ails me. Maybe if we have sex repeatedly my headache will go away.”

Colin laughed and glanced around the room. “Too bad all the walls are clear glass or I’d take you up on that, darlin’. There’s something I need to tell you. Something you need to know.”

“What’s that?”

“I want to marry you. I don’t have a ring yet, but I want you to know how I feel. I love you. I don’t care about anything else. They won’t be able to keep us apart if you’re my wife.” He kissed her gently on the mouth as she digested his words.

“Am I dying or something?”

He coughed in one hand. “No. Why would you say that?”

“You’re all sentimental and you just proposed to me. Plus Paul looked like he lost his best friend a few minutes ago. It makes sense.”

Colin ran his fingers through his hair. “You’re not dying.” He squinted. “Or is this your polite way of changing the subject because your answer to my proposal is no?”

Rachel laughed. “My answer is yes. I’ll marry you. But you get to be the one to tell Paul.”

“Okay.” His relieved smile comforted her. “How would you feel about

flying to Las Vegas to tie the knot?”

She grinned. “I have some very fond sexy memories from there. But if you don’t mind, let’s stay at a different hotel.”

“Perfect. I’ll be here waiting when you wake up, darlin’. Sweet dreams. And if the surgery doesn’t work, I’m willing to try your suggestion and have sex with you until your headache’s gone.”

“My hero.”

Colin slid off the bed and gently kissed her hand. “Don’t ever forget that I love you.”

“I won’t.”

* * * *

Colin waited impatiently for Rachel to get out of surgery. Paul disappeared behind the double doors of the secret Protocol medical center wing hours ago leaving him here to worry alone. He hadn’t been allowed past this portal and he’d paced a hole in the floor waiting for news on Rachel, or actually it would be Laurie who would wake up if all went according to plan.

One side of the double door wobbled slightly signaling that someone approached. Colin strode over as Paul emerged through the space with a relieved look etched on his face. Colin took his first easy breath in several hours.

“The surgery went well?” he asked.

Paul heaved a deep sigh as if in relief. “Yes. The surgery went as expected. She’s not awake yet, however. We’ll know more once she’s conscious. Unfortunately, we’ll have to move her to Alabama before she can be allowed to wake up.”

Colin pressed his lips together. “And is the baby okay?”

Paul sighed again even more deeply. “As far as we know, yes, the baby is fine. She’s not very far along in the pregnancy, only a couple of weeks.”

Colin nodded. “I didn’t know, about the baby, I mean.”

He shrugged. "It's likely she doesn't even know. Like I said, she's only weeks along. So what are you planning on doing with regard to being a husband and your pending fatherhood?"

Colin crossed his arms and went back to pacing the floor. "What are my options? I mean if she's removed from the Protocol program, what will happen to her?"

"Technically, she'll be retired from duty. If you continue your relationship—"

"And I plan to," Colin inserted firmly.

"—then I would imagine she'll remain in Alabama. The house title is in her name. It's the one her parents owned. She can stay in her alternate life and work at the library full time since we won't be yanking her for operations." Paul drifted to a sofa and sat down heavily.

"What about her fake Aunt Fiona?"

Paul rubbed a hand down his face. "Fiona is still a part of the Protocol program. She'll have to be moved. As such she'll be assigned another candidate to watch over elsewhere."

Colin stopped pacing and sat on the sofa next to Paul. "Laurie will have to be told something about the woman who's taken care of her all this time."

"True. You and I will have to come up with an acceptable scenario to remove Fiona and insert you."

Colin cleared his throat as it occurred to him that he'd have to transfer to Alabama. He hadn't discussed anything with his boss yet. "I'll have to talk to Ken about re-assignment. I usually leave out of the DC area."

"I've spoken to him already. He's agreed to it on a provisional basis. You may have to move later. I'm not in any position to tell him how to run his operatives, but he seems willing to accommodate you in this unusual manner, at least for the time being."

Colin nodded. "Can I see her?"

Paul shook his head. "We need to transport her back to Alabama for your reunion."

"Why?"

“She’s going to be bed-ridden in the hospital for several days and we don’t want her waking up here. It’s not your usual hospital, after all. We want her to take it easy in a familiar place. We’ll incorporate her return story with you. My best idea is an automobile accident. We don’t know how much she’ll remember from the cabin in the woods with Montoya and Serena in Georgia. Hopefully, nothing.

“Oh, and I read your field report, by the way. Did Laurie really have your business card on her person?”

Colin closed his eyes. “Yes.”

Paul expelled another deep sigh.

“Are you about to ask me my intentions again?”

“Yes.”

Colin rubbed his hands together as if he were cold, but he wasn’t. “I asked Rachel to marry me. She said yes. I’m hoping when I ask Laurie she’ll say yes too. Will Laurie know she’s pregnant?”

“No. We think it would be better if you’re already married before she finds out. Maybe you should elope instead of having a long drawn out engagement and formal wedding.” Paul grinned.

Colin grinned back. “I’ll pick up tickets for Las Vegas as soon as she’s well enough to travel.”

Paul stood and extended his hand. “I guess she could have done worse.”

Grasping his hand firmly, Colin also stood. “High praise coming from you. Thanks. Any advice?”

“Yeah. Make her happy, or else I’ll hurt you.”

Colin laughed, but knew instinctively that Paul was very serious.

* * * *

Colin, cruising in his standard issue sedan rental, drove into Montgomery with the seven o’clock rush hour morning crowd and crept towards the address he’d followed Laurie to a while back. Paul had assured him that Laurie’s Aunt

Fiona would be waiting for him and understood the scenario they were about to playact for Laurie's benefit.

Stopping at a traffic light, Colin glanced in his rearview mirror and noticed that he was being followed. It was a car he'd noticed shortly after leaving the airport. A single driver, in what was probably an unmarked police car, tailed him at a discreet distance.

Colin made his way toward the library where Laurie worked and the other car followed along with him.

Snagging the cellular phone from his front pocket, he called Paul Kelly.

"What do you want?" was Paul's surly greeting.

"I just got to Montgomery and I've picked up a tail. Are you having me followed?"

"No. Want me to check a plate number for you?"

Colin watched as the car moved closer and recognition of the driver registered. "Never mind. I think I know who it is. Does the Protocol Agency have any local law enforcement on tap for protection down here?"

A long suffering sigh erupted. "No. Just Fiona. That's how we keep things so secret. We don't tell everyone what we're up to." Paul's form of sarcasm was like a physical presence. Colin was occasionally amused. Today, however, it annoyed the hell out of him.

"Thanks for the lesson. I made notes for future reference."

Paul coughed as if covering a laugh. "I'll expect to hear good news in the form of an announcement before the end of the day. Everything is set with Fiona. Don't disappoint me."

It was Colin's turn to sigh. "Right. Talk to you soon, Uncle Paul." He disconnected with a smile and pocketed his cell phone before he heard a reply to the new endearment.

Glancing at the car following him again, Colin couldn't be a hundred percent certain, but thought his shadow might be Royce, the besotted police deputy. He entered the Montgomery Public Library parking lot and promptly exited the lot without slowing. He knew Laurie was already at her house. His shadow followed him through the parking lot and out again. He checked his

mirror as the car moved close enough for the driver to be identified. It was Royce after all.

Now that Colin knew the identity of his tail he headed to Laurie's house. He wheeled his vehicle down Laurie's street. The car following suddenly got closer. Parking on the street in front of Laurie's house, he got out as Royce slid his vehicle in behind the rental with a squeal of brakes.

Royce leapt from his car and called out, "What are you doing here?"

Colin ignored him at first and walked to the porch by way of the side walk splitting the front yard equally in two. On either side of the walkway and in front of the split rail porch, were two flower beds filled with a wild assortment of colorful blossoms.

Pretending to admire the foliage, Colin responded with a curt, "None of your fucking business." He moved to the base of the stairs leading to the porch.

"Laurie won't like you being here." Royce marched toward the stairs.

"I disagree. She'll be very happy to see me. You on the other hand should take a hike."

"No. I'm going in with you."

"Piss off."

They raced each other up the porch steps toward the front door. Royce elbowed his way in front of Colin and blocked the entrance to the house before Colin could knock.

Royce leaned his face within inches of Colin's. "I'm a better choice for her."

"Again, I disagree. Get out of my way." Colin stepped to one side, but Royce followed blocking him again.

"No. I want you out of here or I'll tell Fiona about finding you with Laurie in a motel together."

Colin laughed. "No you won't. Laurie would kick your ass for that. Besides, she doesn't love you. She told me that she thinks of you as a brother. I think it's time you realized that she doesn't return your more ardent feelings."

Royce's shoulders slumped a little and he took a half-step away. "How did you know where she lived?"

“I followed you the night you convinced her to leave my motel room. And by the way, you still owe me a hundred and forty seven dollars for the door you busted.”

Royce’s lips pressed flat and he slammed his eyes shut as if to keep his temper in place. “I care about her. You’re only going to break her heart.”

“You don’t know me. Get outta my way before I kick your ass.”

He held his ground. “I know what kind of man you are by the kind of career you have. You’re always flitting off on assignments leaving her behind. I’m more stable and steady. I’m better for her.” He repeated his plea as if it made a difference. It didn’t.

Colin stopped trying to knock on the door hindered by Royce and his quick, dodging body. “Doesn’t matter. I’m here to ask her to marry me. You haven’t even managed to get her to go out with you. Wake up. Laurie and I love each other. You need to move on.”

Royce snorted at his confession, but didn’t leave. He smirked and said, “I shouldn’t worry. I’m confident that Fiona won’t even let you inside the house.”

“Don’t bet on it.” Colin hoped Fiona wouldn’t change the scenario and screw him over in favor of Royce.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Royce remained very close as Colin knocked loudly on the screen door. After several moments the door opened and a middle-aged woman with shoulder length salt and pepper colored hair stood framed by the screen door.

Aunt Fiona was not at all what he’d expected. Colin smiled and introduced himself. “Hi. I’m Colin. I’m here to see Laurie, please.”

She gave Colin a penetrating once-over stare without smiling or speaking for several more seconds before expelling a deep breath as if only barely resigned to his participation in Laurie’s future.

“Hello, Fiona.” Royce uncrossed his arms and put a big smile on his face.

“What are doing here, Royce?” Fiona responded without returning his smile.

“I happened to drive by and noticed this stranger on your doorstep.” He sent a quick frown of disapproval to Colin. “I wanted to make sure you and Laurie were safe.” Royce peeked over Fiona’s shoulder and his eyes squinted half shut as

if trying to see into the house.

Fiona took a deep breath and exhaled as if searching for strength. “We’re perfectly safe, Royce. Thank you.” Colin didn’t think she sounded very grateful.

Royce ignored her obvious irritation and took a step closer to the screen door. Putting a hand up over his brow to peer into the dark house, he asked absently, “How is Laurie doing? She hasn’t been at the library in over a week. I’ve been a little worried about her. Is she sick?”

Fiona’s mouth flattened. She cleared her throat and glanced at Colin. “Laurie is fine.”

Colin gave Royce a sidelong frown wondering how to get rid of him without starting a fistfight. “Excuse me, Royce. I’m here to see Laurie. Alone. You can go now. As you well know, I’m an FBI agent. I promise to protect all members of the household while I’m inside.”

Royce ignored him and gave Fiona another pleading look. “Do you want me to stay? I’m happy to come inside as an escort.”

Fiona gave Colin a begrudging smile. “No. That won’t be necessary. I’ve been expecting Mr. Riley. He’s planning to marry Laurie. I have no doubt that she’ll be in good hands with him.”

Colin’s eyes widened. He didn’t expect to have her stand up for him. Royce’s expression mirrored that of a puppy that had been unexpectedly kicked to the curb. He took a step backwards and shook his head as if he didn’t want the words of Colin and Laurie’s impending nuptials to settle in his head.

Fiona unlocked the screen door and pushed it open far enough for Colin to enter and said, “See you later, Royce.”

Royce didn’t respond. He turned crisply and marched off the porch. Colin hoped it would be the last time they saw him, but doubted it.

“So you’re Colin Riley, the secret FBI agent, huh?” Fiona’s husky voice surprised him. He didn’t know why, but he’d been expecting her to look and sound like Granny from the old Tweedy bird cartoons. A spinster-like old woman with Victorian manners and dress to match was not anywhere near this woman’s description.

Fiona looked like a seasoned government agent. The piercing stare of her steel gray eyes didn’t miss anything, and Colin wondered if perhaps she *had*

known about him or maybe that something had been going on with Laurie when they'd been together.

"Yes. I'm pleased to finally meet you."

"Cut the crap." Fiona shook her head and laughed mirthlessly. "We both know that if I'd been doing a better job, you wouldn't even be here."

"Not true," Colin replied. His hands went up defensively. "I was very determined. I would have found a way."

Fiona shrugged and turned away. "You can sit if you want." She motioned to the loveseat across the room.

"Where's Laurie?"

"She's still asleep. They've had her pretty drugged up since they brought her back."

Colin nodded and scanned the room.

"The first word out of her mouth when she woke up was your name." Fiona sat down on the sofa. "I know she must care about you."

He smiled. "I love her, you know."

"Oh. I have no doubt of that. I'm just grateful that I didn't get fired for allowing a continued relationship, one that had apparently been going on for some time. I don't usually miss much."

"Laurie was very determined to keep our relationship a secret."

She nodded. "I guess I was more focused on her health. After each subsequent mission in the field, it was harder for her to recover once she got back here. I hope they didn't fuck up her brain. She's a nice kid. I'll miss her."

Fiona glanced at her watch and motioned for him to sit again. "We only have a few more minutes before she wakes up. I have a plan to introduce you into her life. We'll have to play act a little. That won't be a problem for you, will it?"

Colin smiled. "Nope." He ambled over and seated himself on the loveseat. "So does this plan you've concocted include keeping her from going over the edge?"

Fiona smiled. "I believe it does."

* * * *

Laurie stretched under the covers of her very own bed. She was glad to be back home. She still had faint memories of the unusual dreams as she woke further. Colin had carried her through some woods to a truck as the fresh scent of pine enveloped her. She remembered an atrocious headache. It must have been another foolish dream. She searched her memory for further information, but nothing came.

Two days ago she'd woken in her bed with a bandage over the side of her head. More missing time had gone by and this was the first time that someone helped her account for it. Her aunt Fiona had told her that she'd been in a minor automobile accident and hit her head.

The doctor had explained she might have some spotty memory. The headache had subsided in the past couple of days which was a huge relief. She'd been sleeping practically twenty hours a day drugged up on pain medication. Laurie decided it was time to wake up.

She'd also been thinking about Colin quite a bit between bouts of sleep. When he'd left her the last time he'd given her his card. She would have tried to call him already, but the card was missing from where she'd placed it in her bra. She'd almost cried over its loss.

Most likely discarded from her unremembered stay in the emergency room, she now had to wait until Colin came back from his latest assignment. He'd go to the library and she wouldn't be there. Unfortunately, he only knew where she worked.

One thing had become perfectly clear. She wanted to stop sneaking around and hiding Colin from her aunt. Laurie decided it was well past time for her to grow up too.

Today was the day she'd decided to tell her aunt about her boyfriend, Colin Riley, the FBI agent. Sliding out of bed, she glanced at her bedside clock, nine o'clock. After breakfast, she would sit Aunt Fiona down and explain that she was in love. She would make it clear to her aunt that she'd be seeing him with or without her blessing. She hoped her aunt wouldn't be too terribly upset.

A faint knocking sound echoed through the house. Someone was at the front door. Who could that be? Laurie hoped it wasn't Royce. Over her long recuperation, she'd dreamed that he'd shown up and kicked the front door down

again like he had at the motel.

She slid quickly out of bed and threw a robe on over her nightgown. By the time she got to the living room her aunt had opened the door.

“Yes?”

“Hi. I’m here to see Laurie,” Colin’s seductive voice carried into the room from the front porch. *What was he doing here?*

“She’s still asleep.” Her aunt would send him packing next. Laurie wasn’t sure what to do. Should she run out and catch him? Her aunt asked, “Would you like to come in and wait?”

What! Come in and wait? What was her aunt up to?

Colin laughed. “I would. Thanks.”

“I’m having tea. Would you like a cup?”

“That would be great. Thanks.”

As Laurie contemplated what alternate universe she’d woken up in, Colin and Aunt Fiona passed by the hall where she stood frozen.

Aunt Fiona didn’t seem to notice her cowering there, but Colin did. He grinned and waved as he passed by, then motioned her to come down the hall and join him.

She shook her head. He smiled and disappeared into the kitchen as he trailed behind her aunt.

Laurie shook her head. What was going on today? She bucked up her courage and marched down the hall to find out.

She entered the kitchen as Aunt Fiona poured steaming water from a kettle into two cups.

Aunt Fiona glanced up as she strolled to the table situated in the center of the room. “Good morning, sleepyhead. You have a guest. We’re having tea. Would you like some?” She picked up the two cups and placed one on the kitchen table in front of Colin.

Laurie shook her head. “I don’t understand. Why would you invite a stranger into the house?”

“He’s not a stranger, is he? Don’t you know him?”

“Yes.” Laurie scrunched her eyes. “Of course, *I* know him. I want to know how *you* know him.”

Fiona reached into her pocket and held up a small business card. “The emergency room doctor gave me this with your effects. They found it tucked in your...underclothes.”

Laurie squinted and realized it was Colin’s business card. The heat of a deep blush crept over her cheeks as she realized what happened to the card she’d stuck in her bra the day Colin had left.

Fiona continued. “So I called the number and talked to him to find out why you had his card tucked into such an intimate place. He was completely freaked out that I was calling once he realized who I was, but he also sounded very nice.

“So I invited him here for a chat. I wish you’d confided in me, Laurie.” Fiona gave her a disappointed look but it didn’t last long. “I know I’ve been over protective, I just didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“I know you only wanted what was best, but you were so insistent about me not dating Royce or anyone else.”

“You weren’t in love with Royce or anyone else.” Fiona huffed. “And I knew Royce would hound you forever so I made my feelings about his unsuitability very clear to make it easier for you to turn him down.

“Colin is different. I’ve spoken to him at length while you’ve been recovering. He’s here today to have a chat with you.” Laurie sent Colin a quizzical glare, but he only smiled in return.

Laurie turned and he stood up from the kitchen table. She asked, “What would you like to chat about?”

Colin cleared his throat. “I told your aunt that I wanted to marry you. I asked for her blessing.”

“What?” Laurie felt her eyes go very wide.

Colin crossed the room and fell to one knee before her. Out of his trouser pocket he produced a ring box, opened it and held it up for her inspection. “I love you with everything that I am. Will you marry me, Laurie?”

Her mouth hung open. The ring, a beautiful oval solitaire, glistened in the light from the overhead kitchen fixture. She put one finger on the edge of the

black velvet lining the box. “Really? You want to marry me?” Her gaze remained focused on the beautiful ring.

He grinned. “If you say yes, you can put the ring on,” he whispered.

She giggled. “Yes.”

He stood and gave her a bear hug lifting her against his chest to nuzzle her neck. He put her back on the floor, placed the ring on her finger and kissed her mouth tenderly.

Aunt Fiona, who’d never allowed any man entrance into the house, was smiling at Colin. She wandered out of the kitchen and Laurie decided she’d entered a *Twilight Zone* episode.

Laurie turned to stare at Colin. The scent of sweet jasmine tea filled the room and competed with her aunt’s homemade cinnamon rolls. “What have you done to my aunt?”

“I told you, the female relatives of the women I’ve dated always love me. Plus, I showed her the ring. She said it was big enough that I must be serious about you. She’s right, I am.”

She glanced at the diamond on her finger. “Is this really happening or am I dreaming?”

Colin slung his arm around her waist. “It’s really happening. I’m kind of surprised too, but I think we should hurry and get married.” He leaned in and kissed her neck.

Pulling back, Colin kissed her mouth gently. “I’m serious about getting married quickly. I never know when I’ll be called away, so what would you think about flying to Las Vegas today?”

“Today?”

He slid his hands to her face and kissed her. “I just can’t wait.”

Laurie always wanted to do something romantic. She figured spontaneously flying off to Las Vegas to elope qualified.

“Okay. Let’s run off to Vegas and get married.”

The phone in his pocket started ringing. Colin heaved a deep sigh. “See what I mean?”

He glanced at the small screen and apparently identified the caller since he

grimaced before answering with a curt. “What?”

Laurie listened to his side of the conversation. He only said four more words, “Yes...no...today...noted,” before snapping the phone shut.

“Who was that? Do you have to leave?”

“Nobody and no. I’m on vacation. I’m about to get married.” He grinned and squeezed her close again.

“What is that song always playing on your phone anyway? I can’t quite place it.”

“It’s called *Unforgettable*.” He shrugged and kissed the tip of her nose. “I like oldies and especially Nat ‘King’ Cole.”

Epilogue

Laurie, awash in sensation, exhaled a fast deep breath and begged. “Faster, harder. Please, Colin.”

Her brand new husband, currently positioned behind her, stroked a finger across her clitoris as he pushed his cock deeply inside her body.

His fingertips grazed and pinched one nipple. Leisurely. Tenderly. Agonizingly slow. It was taking way too long. She was desperate for release. She wanted hot and hard. She wiggled her butt anxiously against his muscular thighs.

“Patience, darlin’, you don’t want to climax too fast. It’s always better if you wait.” Stroke. Thrust. Pause.

Panting harshly, she pushed her hands flat against the headboard and powered backwards taking his cock deeply. The sudden thrust went seductively deep pushing against her womb.

Incredible.

He groaned as if pained but reciprocated with a short hard thrust.

Laurie moaned. “Yes. Exactly like that.”

Colin’s breath came in short gasps. He sped up the pace slightly and whispered, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.”

He moved his hands from her hips to her shoulders and pulled her upright against his body. She looked down in time to see his tan hands trail across to cover her pale breasts.

Whispering harshly he asked, “Do you want to stroke your clit or your nipples?”

“I...I don’t know.” His suggestions were so shocking and yet oh, so sexy and exciting.

He moved her hands to her breasts. Sandwiched between his hands and her pebbled nipples, she rubbed her palms across the sensitized tips.

Colin slid one hand down and stroked her clitoris again. All the while he pushed his shaft deeply inside her body slowly and methodically. Touching her breasts intensified the already heady experience. Fast reaching a pinnacle of monumental pleasure, she lost herself in the power of the moment.

Laurie's head slid back. Colin kissed the tender spot below her ear as the orgasm hit her in waves she cried out in bliss. Her first climax as a married woman.

Her inner muscles clenched and unclenched on his cock so full and deep inside. He didn't slam inside her as she expected, but instead kept up a slow steady rhythm until he growled and shuddered. His arms slid around her and hugged her tight.

"I love you so much," his whispered message tickled her ear.

"I love you, too."

Seconds later they slid forward onto the bed. Colin snuggled behind and kissed her shoulder.

Each day blended into the next and after four days she was sad to realize they were leaving the next day.

They'd just made love again.

"So Mrs. Riley, what would you say has been the highlight of this honeymoon trip?" Colin's head rested on Laurie's naked breasts and he twirled a lock of her long blonde hair.

"Um...winning a hundred and thirty-four dollars playing Keno was pretty exciting."

"Not exactly the answer I was looking for."

"Oh, I know. The fountain show at the Bellagio after dinner last night, now *that* was impressive."

Colin lifted his head and kissed her throat. "Aren't you the funny one?" The hair twirling and pulling continued.

"I'm kidding. The highlight of this honeymoon trip was..." she paused dramatically, "...getting to see Jay Leno perform live on the strip."

He tugged sharply on the lock of hair eliciting a giggle.

“All right. It’s you.” She laughed. “You are the highlight of the entire honeymoon trip. I almost wish we could stay here from now on and never go back.”

“I don’t believe you.” He kissed a path from her neck, across her jaw and licked his way into her mouth. “I’m going to have to start all over as if it were day one of this trip.”

“Now *that* could be a highlight on this honeymoon.”

After making love for the third time in as many hours, Laurie was exhausted. Colin kissed her shoulder tenderly as she dozed off in his arms.

Her dreams were particularly vivid and after only a few minutes of sleep she sat bolt upright in bed.

Colin stirred away beside her. “What’s wrong, darlin’, bad dream?”

“No. Not bad exactly. Just strange.”

Her heart pounded in her chest. *It had seemed so real.*

Colin sat up next to her. “How strange? Are you okay?” Concern creased his brow. It was the first time this week he was worried about her dreams.

She turned her head and smiled to reassure him. “I’m fine. It’s silly. It was just so vivid.”

Pursing his lips he remarked, “Jay Leno wasn’t in this very vivid dream, was he?”

She laughed out loud. “No. In fact, it was you in my very vivid dream.”

“Oh? Well, perhaps we could re-create it.” He ran his scratchy chin across her shoulder. “What was I doing in your very vivid dream?”

Laurie tilted her head. “You were handcuffed to an iron bed and I rescued you wearing a blue evening dress and spiky heels. Funny, huh?”

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