



LONG, HARD & LETHAL

TRUDY DOYLE

raVinous
romance

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A Ravenous Romance™ Real Man Romance™ Original Publication

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www.ravenousromance.com

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Chapter One

CAMDEN, NJ

TUESDAY 27 OCTOBER

“There he is,” LaBoca cooed, easing his zipper down. She licked her crimsoned lips, smiling wide as his cock sprang forth. “*Aii – es grandisimo, chico – grandisimo!*”

Lieutenant Doug Welland braced himself against the brick wall, spreading his long legs. “So all the girlies tell me,” he said, tipping back his flask as the whore reached into her satchel. “Cocktails before cock, right, sweetheart?”

LaBoca looked up from atop the peach crate, her mouth crooking around flashy whites. “*Chico*, you so know me by now, doncha.” She took a slug of Listerine, swishing before shooting a stream into the alley. “*La formula original*,” she said, snapping on rubber gloves. “Cuts the nasty-nasty. Not that your billy wouldn’t taste like *azucar* without it, hmm...*chico?*”

“The original Blow Pop, sweetheart – *ooh*.” He gnarled his fingers into her ruby-red hair, taking another pull from the flask. No one gave head like LaBoca Rodriguez. Made doubly convenient, the whore had a germ phobia. Getting blown by LaBoca was like walking into a clean room. He glanced down. Rubber gloves, antiseptic rinse, dick duly swabbed. And a throat as deep as the Grand Canyon. She gave his balls a ben-wa roll, her tongue flicking his head before she swallowed him whole. Doug closed his eyes and tried to concentrate. *Son of a bitch, this was taking way longer than it used to.*

“Everything okay, *chico?*” said LaBoca, coming up for air.

“Aces, sweetheart,” he lied, trying to focus.

She grabbed his hips, pulling him in tighter. “I don’t thi-ink so...” she said, swirling her hand up his taut belly. “I think *mami* has to get tough.” She arched up, jackhammering.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. His ass stiffened, his balls tightened. *Don’t think of her!* But he did anyway, and the next thing he knew he was coming into LaBoca’s *boca*. By the time

he finished, she was already pulling out the Listerine. And Doug, his flask. He took one of the wet wipes she proffered and cleaned off, tossing it to stick against the alley wall. *God, this was getting tedious.* What he wouldn't give to fuck real pussy again.

If only he could.

"Better?" LaBoca said, and swished.

He smiled, zipping. "The best. Always a treat, sweetheart," he said, pulling a twenty from his pocket.

LaBoca stood up, backing away. "Oh, no, *chico*. You know I don't take no money from you. I do that and *boom* – I'm riding in the back of your police car."

"C'mon, as if I'd do that," Doug said, straightening his jacket and tie. "What good would it do me to arrest the best little cocksucker in Camden, New Jersey?"

She gave his package a tweak. "You said it, *chico*. And that's why I—"

"There you are, Dougie-boy."

Doug turned. Oh Christ – Stewart. Doug ran a hand through his spiky, blond hair. "Didn't know they were flushing the sewers this early in the morning."

Lt. Wade Stewart tilted his gleaming brown head, lighting a smoke as he leaned against the wall. "Aw...and look what they washed out – my ol' pal." Stewart caught the whore's arm as she tried to slip past. "Hey, *cucaracha*, where you going? Dougie ain't the only one on the squad who needs his pipes cleaned, you know."

LaBoca smiled sweetly. "You jumping over to my side of the fence now, *mi chocolate*?" She slid her hand inside his jacket and up his broad chest. "Let LaBoca be the first."

He grinned, pinching her cheek. "You're messing my meaning, hot pants. I'm just thinking what a mint I could make off you." He spanked her Spandexed ass. "Now go on – get out of here."

"*Con gusto*," she chirped, scuttling away.

"So, what you doing doggin' me in alleys?" Doug said. "What, the boys holding out on you?"

Stewart's mouth quirked, smoke shooting from his nostrils. "You're a sick motherfucker, you know that?"

Doug jabbed Stewart's shoulder. "That's what they're saying, sweetpea. And I'm kinda inclined to agree." He walked to the curb, surveying the line of boarded-up houses, the street so much meaner with the autumn leaves half gone. "So what do you want, anyway?"

The detective flicked his cigarette to the sidewalk, crushing it. "Not to put a damper on your afterglow, but the Captain wants to see you. And since you're not answering your cell, he had the brilliant idea that maybe – just maybe – his partner might know where you were."

Doug pulled out his phone, pressing it on; the message icon was up. He scrolled: three from the Captain, two from Stewart, one from a squeal, and one more from – he had no idea.

"Since when are you turning off your phone?" Stewart asked.

Who the hell is 609-387...? All it said was *New Jersey*. "Aw...did you miss me?" He slid the phone into his pocket, scanning the street. "Where's the car?"

Stewart looked at him. "Where's yours?"

He stepped into a gutterful of broken glass. "On a gorgeous day like today? I'm out for a stroll."

"Jesus," Stewart said, aiming toward the unmarked Crown Victoria. "You really don't give a fuck, do you?"

"All part of the persona, my boy," Doug said, swinging himself into the passenger seat. "Unlike you, I'm exactly what I seem."

"Dude, my days on the down low are ancient history. The difference is, I know it."

Doug leaned back, took one more swig, then closed his eyes. "Let me know when we're there."

"Asshole," Stewart muttered, pulling into the street.

FIFTH DISTRICT, CITY OF CAMDEN, NJ POLICE DEPARTMENT
DETECTIVE UNIT

Doug looked to his partner, the squad room raucous with uniforms, staff and witnesses, plus the random handcuffed suspect. “So what’s he want?”

“I have no idea,” Stewart said, pouring a cup of hours-old coffee. He glanced toward Captain Halchak’s glass-walled office. “Let me know when you find out.”

Doug popped an Altoid. “You’re not coming?”

“Wasn’t invited.” He smiled. “Give him my best.”

Doug turned toward the office. “Just what I fucking need.”

“That better be you, Welland,” he heard when he got there and, straightening his tie, went in.

The Captain glanced up from his computer, his index fingers tapping away. “Your phone broken?”

Doug leaned against the door, hands in pockets. “No, sir. It must have accidentally shut off when I dropped it .”

“Really.”

He shrugged. “You know. Things happen.”

“Yeah. Like me accidentally dropping you off the roster.”

“What?” he said, straightening.

A few more taps and he looked up. “Sit.”

After a moment or two, Doug did.

Captain Alex Halchak leaned back in his chair, assessing. A thirty-year veteran, everyone knew him as nearly unflappable. Except for a little gray around the temples, he belied his fifty-four years with a fitness absent in many men half his age. He took one more look at the computer screen, then turned to the detective thirteen years his junior.

“You’re officially on leave,” he said.

“You’re joking.”

The Captain laughed. "I don't joke. And you don't have shit to say about it."

"I sure as hell do. I passed every physical they gave me, even the psycho."

"All except one."

"Which one's that?" Doug asked.

Halchak leaned in. "Mine."

Doug started to say something, then dropped it. He wanted to punch the wall.

"Look, this isn't easy for me," Halchak said. "You're a good cop and a smart one, too, and I'll tell you why. You never let bullshit get in the way of common sense. I mean, hell, take that partner of yours. No one wanted to work with him, but you saw right away that what he is doesn't mean shit to the job."

"Because I had my asshole sewed up."

The Captain laughed. "More like he could kick that ass six ways to Sunday."

"Well, that, too."

"The thing is," Halchak continued, "it's been two and a half years, Welland, and still you're dragging those chains. Normally I'd leave your personal life alone, but unlike Stewart out there, it *is* screwing with the job. Your judgment's shot to hell."

Doug felt his insides tighten. "Don't tell me you're talking about the shooting again."

"Oh, now there's a brilliant deduction."

He'd never let it go, would he? A gang-banging, two and a half years earlier, he and his old partner. Each took a bullet, his partner a round in his armor, Doug two inches from his heart.

"Drop it already," said Doug, stiffening. "*I* have."

"The hell you have. Face it, you should've never gone in there."

"I didn't have a choice."

"You always have a choice. The thing is, Carmelli went in to stop some bad guys. You went in to stop a bullet."

Doug's fingers clawed into the armrest. "Meaning no disrespect, sir, but you're way out of line."

"Am I? Then explain to me why one of the best cops I ever knew is becoming the worst. Who cares more about getting his dick sucked and his drunk on than protecting the innocents from the crazies, or about how many shitbuckets he can piss off bad enough so they'll pop him and get it over with. Listen, I'm all for you proving me wrong, and if you want to do that, then here's the thing." He pushed forward a slip of paper. "Call this number."

Doug glanced at it; the same mystery number as on his phone. "Who is this?"

Halchek leveled his gaze. "Gina Bardone."

It hit him like a sucker punch. "You can't be serious."

"That's the second time you questioned my intentions, Welland. You'd think by now you would've guessed I'm not playing here." His face hardened. "Listen, if I had put you one leave after it happened maybe we could've skipped this whole drama, but I'm gonna fix that now, so get this: Call the woman and face the damn thing once and for all, or spend the next six months on the psycho couch. She's in some kind of trouble and you've been recommended to help her."

Doug flew out of the chair, slamming it against the wall. "Who the fuck in their right mind would ever recommend me for that?"

Captain Halchak turned back to his computer. "Only your old partner. And he already knows you're crazy."

Carmelli. The room went red. *Roark-motherfucking-Carmelli*. He might just have to kill him.

* * * *

ADMIRAL WILSON BOULEVARD, CAMDEN

Doug remembered a time when even a glance down Admiral Wilson Boulevard would get him hard. Everywhere – titty bars, peep shows, Live Nude Dancing, a veritable cornucopia of soft flesh and fantasy. Now, ever since the Republican National Convention

a few years back, the bridge road to Philadelphia was as white bread-boring as a church lady breakfast. Razed buildings gave way to a tree-lined avenue with riverwalks, jogging trails and monuments, though luckily enough, a few holdouts remained. Doug parked his battered '87 Dodge Aries and slid into the LuLu Lounge, his mouth dry and his mind seething.

The bartender looked up as a thonged and topless blonde humped a pole to hip-hop behind him. "Hey, Dougie, whassup? Scotch?"

"What a lucky guess," he said, scanning the dimly lit bar, the couches, the curtained alcoves at the far end. "Tracy here?"

"Upstairs," he said, pouring out a double. Doug downed it, wagging his finger for another. "So how's things at the squad?"

Doug snatched the glass, downed it, then waggled for one more. "It's Disney World every day, Sal," he said, snatching the glass and turning toward the staircase.

The bartender sniffed. "For you, I bet it is."

The stairwell smelled of piss and perfume and Doug climbed the steps two at a time, the pulsing music below giving way to the low thrum of closed-door sex. He knew Tracy like a blind man his dog, a tool he used to get through the job, a necessity like water for washing. He stopped at her door and knocked. When she said, "Come," he took that as a given.

Tracy's room was plush with pillows and scarf-filtered light, the mid-morning sun eking through cracks in the blinds. She pushed up from a nest of sheets and tangled blankets, her chestnut hair spilling over her naked back. "Hey, sugar," she said in her Georgia drawl, her voice still thick from sleep.

Doug leaned against the door jamb, sipping scotch. "Got some booty left for me?"

She turned over, the covers slipping down her torso, her surgically-enhanced breasts mounding like two ripe cantaloupes. "Always for you, honey." She waved him in. "Come to Tracy, now."

He plopped heavily to the bed just as she sprung from it, kneeling to pull off his shoes as he loosened his tie and shrugged off his jacket, his socks, his trousers. Doug stood and stepped from his shorts until all that was left was his shirt and holstered semi-automatic. He shrugged it from his shoulder, tossed off his shirt, and slipped his holster back on.

She thumbed the leather strap. "This makes me hot just looking at it," she whispered, and sliding a manicured hand up his tautly muscled chest, urged him back onto the bed.

He stretched out on the mattress, setting the scotch to her bedside table before gripping the brass bars of the headboard. He could hear her breath intake sharply and he laughed to himself, this effect he seemed to have on all the ladies, whores or not. He flexed his arms, making his muscles bulge, and Tracy responded by straddling him, her warm, moist clit resting atop his taut solar plexus, the pointed nipples of her bulbous breasts just inches from his mouth. He latched onto one, sucking, biting, her skin tasting of vanilla, her crotch sliding and grinding against him. She reached back and grasped his still-flaccid cock, her thumb circling its head.

"You want to fuck me, sugar?" she asked, a little breathlessly.

He tongued her areola once, then let go, pulling his legs toward him as he pressed Tracy back against his knees. She raised her arms and threaded her fingers through her hair, her breasts rising and her eyes hooding. Doug grabbed his scotch and took a long pull before setting it back, his hands sliding to her hips, his thumbs to her pussy.

"Oh!" she squeaked, when one thumb found her clit.

She tilted her pussy forward, already slick and hot and so ready for him, his thumb stroking and flicking as he slid a hand to her ass and squeezed. Never failed to amaze him how small some women were, with their little feet and tiny waists and arms he could encircle with a thumb and forefinger, looking so fragile he could crush them with just a cross of his legs. He reached to her night table and grabbed a bottle of baby oil, tilting her back again as he dribbled a shot into her navel. She shuddered and he pushed her back

farther, lowering his legs a bit as the oil slithered from her navel and down her abdomen, glistening her dark wiry bush as it funneled over her lips into the valley of her vulva and onto his own dampened skin. He slid his hand into the oil, then up and around her breasts, her chest heaving as he squeezed her slick and rock-hard nipples, her body shimmering in the thin light. She squirmed, her neck arching as she stretched herself back, her pussy rising to meet his thumb flicking ever faster and faster against her.

“Oh sugar...oh sugar...oh!” Then his hand twisted and his finger dove inside her.

She lifted up, her pussy inches off his belly as he pumped her, his thumb still working her clit. He could feel her throbbing in his hand, her frenzy rising, her hips jerking as she worked towards her climax. And come she would, like fireworks, Doug knew. Because he was a master at getting women off, and what he was doing to her was the basics, baby steps, Orgasm 101. Miles off what he was capable of if he wanted to. He glanced toward the clock on her dresser. Any second now...

“Oh sugar...oh baby...fuck me – *please* fuck me!” She squeezed his wrist, her eyes glazing over. “Please fuck me! Please!”

He was as solid as concrete, as rigid as an Iowa corn stalk, as hard as a quantum chromodynamic theorem. *Fuck* – he snorted – and he was drunk. Already. But not as drunk as he was going to get. Not by a major long shot.

“Doug – Doug!” She was panting, sweating, shivering, riding his finger as he pushed her back even further, his steel shaft of a cock now stroking the crack of her ass. “Damn it – *please* fuck me!” How many times had she said that to how many men, stroking their egos with her pleading and whining, getting them harder and getting her a bigger payoff, making them feel they had come straight from Stud Alley? But Doug knew better. He knew that with him, she meant it. But he also knew she couldn’t spread her legs wide enough to get him into her. She flung her hair, squeezed her breasts, moaning, pleading, but he wouldn’t, no matter how much she begged. He grinned, maybe a little maniacally. Begging only made him pump her harder, faster, his fingers so oiled she nearly spun right off him, but no – a second later she was shaking, vibrating against

his legs, her mouth open in a silent shriek as she bucked against him. When he finally withdrew his finger, his thumb from her she was flushed, a bit limp, dazed. He let his legs fall. She smiled, dizzily sated, and bent to kiss him.

He caught her shoulders, her mouth an inch from his. “You’re a bit north, Georgia peach,” he said, and she winced, biting her lip. He raised his arms over his head to again grasp the bars and she tossed her hair to the side, sliding her huge breasts down his chest, his belly and into the tangle of blond hair guarding the base of his cock, settling into the vee of his legs. She stuck out her tongue, the tip of it traveling up his length to his slick, silky crown.

When he felt her lips close around him he shut his eyes, but still she appeared, always there, always there, always. He gripped the bars, his fingers so tight around the brass he could feel it collapsing, his nails digging into his skin, but still she was there. *Go away*, he thought, his body stiffening as he emptied himself into the whore’s mouth. *Goddamn it, Gina, leave me alone.*

* * * *

CARMELLI RESIDENCE

RIVERBORO, NJ

WEDNESDAY 28 OCTOBER

Roark Carmelli opened his eyes and immediately knew what time it was. Same time it was the morning before and the morning before that, when he had woke knowing what time it was then, too. He leaned up on his elbow and looked past the mountain his wife was becoming, enormously pregnant and still two months to go. The Italian in him, the romantic and earthy side, congratulated him on his manly prowess, not only for getting his wife pregnant their first time together, but with triplets, for Christ’s sake, and no medical intervention necessary. The Irish in him, the practical but no less lusty side, congratulated him on his efficiency, where he and his wife, at forty-four and nearly forty respectively, had gotten their childbearing duties in under the wire and with the remarkable compression of two heirs and a spare. But the whole that comprised Roark

himself was just proud as hell and terribly in love, which even at this late and unwieldy stage still produced in him a morning wood comparable to forged steel. He slid his hand over her massive belly, nuzzling her neck.

After a moment or two, Pam stirred, sighing as she glanced at the bedside clock. “Three-twenty-two again,” she said, yawning. “Jesus, Roark, your cock is like one of those pop-up turkey timers.”

“What can I say?” he said, snuggling closer, his hand sliding around breasts grown twice their normal size. “Monstrously pregnant women get me hard. Especially when they’re my wife.”

Pam’s hand roamed to his leg, sliding it down his tightening thigh. “I feel like one of those pagan fertility idols we saw at the Museum of Natural History – all tits and a belly as big as Santa’s sack. If this gets you hot, then, player, get up here.”

“That’s not what does it,” he said, prodding her to open as he braced himself over her. His cock nudged her slick pussy as he slid one hand down her leg. “It’s the swollen ankles that really get me off.”

“And the nipples as big as coasters? I feel like I should be giving birth in a potato field.” He brushed his hand over her bush, his finger circling her clit. “Let me know how I’m doing down there, Roark. I haven’t seen it in months.”

“It’s still there, don’t worry,” he said, easing himself in, half-entering as far as he’d let himself go. She groaned, brushing his cheek. It was almost enough to set him off.

“That’s it, big boy...” she whispered, writhing slightly, “show me how the whales do it.”

He stroked her easy, arching over her belly to kiss her enormous breasts, her skin warm and tasting of sleep and something he couldn’t define yet still made his head spin. And his cock harden even more.

“Jesus, Pam – I think I’m already gonna—”

The doorbell rang.

His head shot up. “What the fuck!”

Pam stiffened. “Who can that be?”

He could feel her pulse kicking up as he slid himself from her. “Fuck if I know,” he said, grabbing his jeans from the floor. Then out of a habit too long ingrained, he opened his bedside table drawer, punched a few numbers in a heavy metal box and, lifting the lid, pulled out his pistol. He loaded the magazine, then tucked it into his waistband. “Be right back.”

The bell rang again. Pam grabbed his arm. “Jesus, Roark,” she said, glancing at the weapon. “Do you really think that’s necessary?”

He shrugged her arm away, gently but firmly; how could he possibly explain it to her? Maybe it was the Italian kicking in again, that fiery yet feral part of him wanting to protect his woman and his cave, or maybe it was just the Irish cop he’d always be. Whatever it was, he said, “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

The bell rang again, this time nonstop. Roark trotted lightly down the steps and into the big colonial’s center hall. He could see the shadow of a man through one of the skinny windows running the length of either side of the door, hear the bell silence only to be replaced by an insistent banging. Two long strides across the sanded hardwood and he clutched the knob, his other hand hovering just above his waistband.

“Whoever you are, you’d better be bleeding,” he said.

More banging before, “Carmelli, you motherfucker – open this motherfucking thing – you’re a fucking dead man!”

Roark sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair. He opened the door to find Doug propped against the jamb.

“You motherfucker...” Doug said, swaying slightly. “I’m gonna...”

Roark stepped aside and let his old partner and best friend fall flatly, yet firmly, on his face.

Chapter Two

CARPELLI RESIDENCE – RIVERBORO

Doug needed to puke. What a bitch he had no idea where the toilet was.

He reeled from the bed, his feet hitting unfamiliar floor, desperately scanning the room. An uncurtained window, boxes lining the wall, three doors, two on one side. Where the hell was he? Think, think. He left some place to come to...to...

“Fuck.”

He palmed his forehead, his stomach lurching, his brain ready to roll out of his cranium. He needed to find someplace to hurl in ten seconds or he was going to make a mess on someone’s hardwood— He clasped his mouth and leapt toward the door in front of him.

Sometimes luck smiles at you. Behind the door was a bathroom. Doug threw back the lid and emptied his lurching stomach. Not that there was much in it beyond scotch. He couldn’t remember the last time he ate. Peanuts, maybe? Or some bar food. Whatever. He straightened up, pissed, flushed. To his right was the shower. He shrugged off his trousers, shorts, ran a hand up his shoulder to slide off his holster – *wait a minute*. He reached inside it. *Empty*.

The chorus sang in illumination. *Son of a bitch*. He was at Carmelli’s.

Motherfucker. He hurled his holster, shirt to the floor and stepped into a cold shower.

Fifteen minutes later he walked naked into the bedroom, toweling his spiky blond hair, his gaze falling to the chair in the corner. He laughed painfully. On it sat a pair of rolled-up socks, shorts still in the package, a clean shirt. Considerations matching the razor and toothbrush on the sink. This was what marriage got you. Or was it just Carmelli rubbing shit in his face? Didn’t matter. It wasn’t like he couldn’t use them. So he did, all of them, and grabbing his jacket and empty holster, left the bedroom for the stairway

down.

He had never been inside before, had only seen the house from the street. He remembered Carmelli telling him they had only moved in a month earlier, still trying to get it ready before the babies came. *Babies*.

“Back here,” he heard as rolled off the last step, the scent of coffee hitting him strong. He turned toward the kitchen in the back. Sunlight flooded her as she stood at the island, lifting a carafe of that liquid sustenance, her eyes still clamped on her laptop. She tapped a key, then turned. Pamela Flynn, bestselling writer – Christ Almighty, Carmelli sure scored huge with her. Even with a belly looking big enough to hold ten babies, with that long auburn hair, those piercing eyes, she was still beautiful.

He clenched his jaw, swallowing hard. So beautiful he could hardly stand the sight of her.

“Good morning, Douglas,” Pam said, pouring out a mug. “So great to see you. Thanks for scaring the shit out of me.”

Now he was scaring women. *Nice job, asshole*. He took a step back. “I’m sure I’ve won the Prick of the Year award. Just give me my piece and I’ll get out of here.”

“Sit the hell down,” she said, shoving a mug of coffee at him. “Now tell me how you want your eggs.”

“In the carton,” he said. “Couldn’t eat if I tried.”

She leaned on her hip. “But you could drink, right? If I poured a shot into that mug, tell me you wouldn’t suck it down, but a plate of eggs is a problem?”

Doug pulled the coffee to him. It hurt too much too argue. “Scrambled.”

“Thank you,” Pam said, already cracking the eggs.

They didn’t talk while she cooked, while Roark’s own-baked bread toasted, or when she poured him a tall glass of tomato juice. Or even while he inhaled all at a pace rivaling the land/speed record. After a couple of aspirins and one more mug of coffee Doug marveled at how much better he felt. If only physically.

Because the inner part of him, the part that pained beyond the corporeal, was still

taking a beating. As in that nest of domesticity and intellect, surrounded by the scents of fresh paint and warm bread, amid NPR, the terracotta herb garden and the literary journals, Doug felt stupid and intrusive, like a monkey at a symposium. If there'd been a trap door beneath him, he surely would've sprung it. But on the other hand, why should he feel that way? He hadn't asked to be there – he'd been forced. Roark Carmelli hadn't intruded in his life as much as battle-axed his way into it.

"Thanks, Pam," he said, taking his plate to the sink. "I'm sure I don't deserve it."

She turned from the sink. "What you deserve is a punch in the gut, but my aim's off these days. I'll leave it to Roark."

He slung his jacket over his shoulder. "Hey, he's got some explaining to do himself. Believe it or not, I had a reason for coming here last night. Where is he anyway?"

"At Serious Joe, working," she said, crossing her arms over her massive belly. "Like I should be."

"Like I would be too, if you'd give me my piece."

"Don't look at me. The only pieces I handle are fictitious. And after last night, I sure as hell didn't want someone strapped and shitfaced in my house."

He leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Jesus, woman, you're cold." He shoved his hand in his pocket. Then the other. Then in his jacket. "Damn – did he take my car keys, too?"

"And the car," said Pam, waddling back to her laptop. "Since he had to move it off the lawn anyway."

"Son of a bitch. That means I'll have to—"

"Walk? Ought to do you good to go *toward* something, don't you think?"

* * * *

SERIOUS JOE COFFEE BISTRO – RIVERBORO

It hadn't been far, only five or six blocks, a little over a half-mile to Carmelli's coffee bistro, Serious Joe. He had to admit, the crisp October air did help to clear his

head. In fact, it was a hell of a lot more pleasant outside than Doug knew it was going to be inside. He could see his car parked in the small lot in the back. His stomach tightened. Even though he loved the man like a brother, there were just some things he had no business butting into. This, sure as hell, was one of them. He stepped inside.

And into another world. Coming onto lunchtime, Serious Joe's tables were already three-quarters taken, the buzz of chatter and low hum of jazz filling the sunny room. Doug looked past the potted plants and eclectic artwork to the counter where Roark held court, a small coterie of women *ooing* and *aahing* as he worked some caffeinated magic with an especially elaborate French press.

"Add a little cinnamon and – *voila!*" Roark said, pouring the coffee into a bright ceramic cup. "Java to die for."

A woman leaned over, slurping a sip. "Oh, Roark...it's fabulous," she cooed, gifting him with an interior view of her Wonderbra. "Shelly, c'mere, you gotta taste this."

As gal-pal attempted to give Roark another hands-free demonstration of breast lift-and-squish, Doug interjected with, "Dude, I think you have something of mine."

Roark looked up, a brow raised. "Well, well, if it ain't the midnight rambler." He poured the rest of the coffee into two more cups and, adding them to a tray, directed a server to their table. "Enjoy, ladies. See you soon."

"Bye, Roark," one of them said, each giving Doug a quick up-and-down.

Roark folded his muscled arms across his chest. "You have something to say to me, Welland?"

"I think you know that."

"Outside, then," he said, and Doug followed him through the kitchen and out the back door. When they reached the end of the parking lot, Roark turned. "Okay. Talk."

Doug stared at his old partner. A million things jumped to the fore, but the only thing he could say was, "Why'd you do it?"

Roark met his gaze. "Because she needs you."

“I’m the last thing she needs! Christ, didn’t she prove that already?”

“If that were true she would’ve stayed gone and we wouldn’t be having this conversation.” A breeze kicked up and Roark shoved his hands in his pockets. “Look, she came to me asking about protection, but I told her I didn’t do that anymore. So I told her to get a hold of you. When I said that, she looked like it hurt just hearing your name, but who was she kidding? I could see she was just going through me to get to you. I said I’d give you a call, but she said she’d contact you herself.”

“Her number was on my phone this morning. Did you give it to her?”

“No. She must have gone through Halchak.”

“And he jumped on it to get me off the Unit.” He snorted. “Thanks, buddy.”

Roark’s eyes flared. “He didn’t fire you, did he? Because if he did, I swear to God I’ll go down there and tell that bastard—”

“No, I’m just suspended to Psycho. Unless I go see her.”

“Then do it,” Roark said, looking genuinely relieved.

Doug glared at him. “*You* fucking psycho?”

“*You* are if you don’t. And after last night, I don’t need any more proof.”

“This is bullshit.” Doug held out his hand. “Give me my piece.”

Roark clasped his friend’s shoulder. “Doug, listen to me, what can it hurt to just talk to her? I’m sure by now—”

“Hurt?” He shrugged him off. “What the fuck do you know about hurt, you and that cozy little fairyland you got going on five streets back? Have you ever had a woman rip off your balls off and shove them down your throat? I don’t need your Dr. Phil lectures. All I need are my car keys and my piece so I can get the fuck out of here.”

“Top drawer, my desk,” Roark said, tossing the keys. “Then go fuck yourself on the way out.”

Doug watched him leave. He didn’t think it was it was possible to feel any shittier than when he’d first woke up, but there he was, surpassing himself. He picked up his keys, his head throbbing. Suddenly the idea of driving his car into the river seemed oddly

calming. He headed toward the back door.

Roark's office was just to the left of the kitchen. The man looked up as Doug walked in, then promptly left the room. Good. He had enough confrontation for one day. He turned to the office, opening the door.

A sledgehammer couldn't have hit him any harder.

A spike heel, a slit skirt, those beautiful breasts shifting as she turned from the desk and brushed a dark strand from her uptwist, her eyes burning like warmed sherry.

"Hello, Lieutenant," Gina said, aiming his own weapon at his heart.

* * * *

She couldn't move, taking in the sight of him. Like the first time they met almost three years earlier, the calm, cool detective, a witness for the prosecution, and she, the hard-as-nails attorney for the defense. He had a rep as a dogged investigator, and Gina was the Last Hope of Lost Causes. After the trial ended, he had met her outside to concede victory. Three days, several calls to room service and a pile of tangled sheets later, she had graciously accepted. And she knew that now, like then, it would be easy to succumb, even with so much rough mileage between them. Spiky hair the color of sweet corn, eyes so icy blue they were almost crystalline, as his large, muscular body filled the doorway, such cheekbones, such an angular nose, such memories of that sensual mouth falling on hers. When he closed the door, it was all she could do to keep standing.

The gun twisted on her finger, upending. "Looking for this?" she managed to say.

It took a few moments before he moved, but when he did, he was as swift as a panther. "Give it here," he said, his voice gravelly, taking the pistol from her, an electric shock shooting up her arm when their fingers touched. He opened his jacket and slipped it into his holster, those aquamarine eyes never leaving hers.

Gina tossed her head, sincerely hoping it wasn't coquettish, as she only wanted to see him better. He was looming over her, taking her in, standing so close she felt the heat from his body coming at her in waves, and with his collar opened and his tie loosened,

she could see the pulse point at his neck thumping wildly. Like how her own heart nearly beat a hole in her chest.

She licked her lips. “Lieutenant, I know you’re probably wondering why after all this time I—”

He grabbed her, his big hands clamping around her arms and before she knew it, he had twisted her around, slamming her back against the door.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “What do you want?”

He was squeezing the life from her, his hands shaking. “I need your help,” she said.

His jaw tightened. “And I need you to stay away from me.”

“But I can’t.” She slumped in his grasp. “Not anymore.”

Was that a groan? She couldn’t tell. Nor did she have time to decipher it. Because within a breath he was kissing her, her head swimming as his tongue parted her lips and drove inside, silencing anything she wanted to say.

For the next few moments she existed purely on a sensual level – the taste, the scent, the feel of him commanding every receptor of her being, physical or mental. His mouth was hot, insistent, nearly maniacal as his body pressed against her, his heart thumping wildly atop hers. He tasted of coffee and faintly of mint, his skin smelling of soap, his hair of some vague domesticity, which shot a stab of crazed jealousy through her, making her squirm beneath his grasp. He growled something indiscernible, and his hand slid to the curve of her ass, pressing, kneading, his mouth leaving hers to trail hot kisses along the arching curve of her neck.

She groaned, her skin suddenly electric, sparks flying from every pore in her body. “Good God, Doug...good—”

No time to finish. Not when those fiery lips had wound their way down her neck to her collarbone, his hand tracing her shoulder and down the slope of her breast. Again she arched into him, rising on her toes, his cock a steel shaft along her hip. Her hand fell to it, and squeezed.

He bucked against her and shoved her away, his hand snaking between them to rip the buttons from her shirt. A quick flick of the clasp and her breasts spilled from her bra, Doug seizing a nipple between his teeth, pulling. She jolted against him, groaning, her breath coming hard, shoving her fingers into his hair. As he licked and sucked, the combination of heat and cool sent ripples of beautiful agony through her and she writhed against him, pressing into his groin. Again he pushed her away and grasping her hips, fell to his knees.

Gina looked down. “Oh God...oh Doug...” she heard herself say. He slid his hands down her thighs, then slowly slipped them under her skirt, sliding it upward, taking the fabric with them, over her stockings, her garters, back up her shivering thighs until he reached her panties. He looked up at her, one hand cupping her pussy.

Her chest was heaving, her nipples rock hard, her panties soaking his palm. Those icy eyes caught on hers looked so different now; a kind of fever laying beneath them. She felt raw, exposed, yet oddly comforted, as if she had run into someone familiar far from home. She desperately hoped Doug felt that way, too, that it was more than simple lust, or there’d never be any hope for them. When she pressed a hand to his shoulder, his gaze was almost pleading. Right then, she would have given him anything. Yet somehow she knew *taking* was more on the agenda.

A second later he yanked her panties down and, grasping her ass, sank his mouth into her.

A bolt of pleasure rocketed through her, her knees buckling. Good thing he held her up, his hand firmly under her ass as his tongue flicked wildly against her clit. A scream caught in her throat. Almost instantly she came, her hips quivering as he raced his tongue around her clit and over her slit, wave after wave of pleasure gripping her so intensely it flirted with pain. And when he parted her lips and drove his tongue inside her she almost shot through the roof, her body shaking so violently she nearly tore the hair from his scalp, her fist falling to pummel his back.

“Stop, stop!” she demanded, still coming, his mouth relentless as he pushed her

higher and higher, his hands gripping her ass so tightly she could feel his nails digging into her skin. Gina didn't know how much longer she could stand it but she didn't want him to stop either, wondering what she'd finally say to him when he did. Yet inwardly she exalted. This was Doug – *Doug!* Who else could make her feel this way? She slipped her hand to his lips, touching the tongue tasting her. It was hot and cool and persistent, and when he caught her finger and nipped it, sucking it into his mouth, the gesture seemed more intimate than if they were both naked, lying in each other's arms. It was then that he finally released her, and with her clit still throbbing, dripping with satiety, he slowly kissed his way up her fevered body to the curve of her jaw where just as suddenly he stopped. He pulled back slightly, staring at her.

With her breasts still exposed, her skirt still pushed around her hips, his hands still holding her up, Gina was completely under his power and the idea terrified her. Terrified and thrilled her – and like he had so many times before, she wanted him to pummel her with his massive cock, to fuck her senseless. But even more, she wanted him *inside* her, all of him, mind, body, heart, and she wanted it with a hunger so overwhelming she couldn't show it on her face. Unlike the man who was staring at her, his expression marked by a confusion she hoped to God wasn't contempt.

Then all at once he kissed her, his hands ravaging her hair, combs dropping away to send it spilling about her shoulders, his mouth musky with her taste and his own insistence, his cock pulsing against her belly. She snaked her hand into his trousers, touching it. He jolted and just as quickly as before, he whisked her around, a look of horror on his face.

"I have to go," he said.

Gina grabbed his arm. "Doug, don't leave! We have to talk. Believe it or not, it's life or death. You have to help me."

He took a step back. "Get someone else."

"There *is* no one else!"

But the fact that there always had been was why he was leaving now. "Doll, you

haven't changed a bit. Still in summation mode." He bolted out the door.

"Doug!" Gina stumbled, yanking up her panties and down her skirt, buttoning her ruined shirt as she flew to the window. But Doug was already in his car, his arm flung across the seat as he looked over his shoulder, backing out. She ran to the window opposite, seeing him whip out into the street, nearly colliding with an oncoming truck. He stomped the gas, tearing away.

"Damn!" she muttered, falling back against Roark's desk. What the hell would she do now?

* * * *

Any second, Doug would detonate. He careened through traffic, barreling up the street to the River Line Light Rail's parking lot, wedging the car into a slot near a clump of evergreens. He grabbed a towel out of his gym bag, yanking down his zipper a moment before his cock nearly exploded into his hand. With Gina's taste on his lips he emptied himself into the towel.

Holy fuck, how he still wanted her.

He closed his eyes, replaying the last few minutes as he regained his breath. Two and a half years later she was still a goddess, an arrogant Venus, snaring him with one blink of those sherry eyes. He ached for that gorgeous ass, those thighs like velvet, a pussy so deep he could sink every inch of himself. And those tits, heavy and overflowing in his hands – how he loved to bury himself against her. How he loved the curve of her neck, the silkiness of her chestnut hair, how she sighed when he kissed her.

How he had loved her. And how she'd ripped his heart right out of him.

He opened his eyes. To his right, a woman and her kid were getting out of their car and staring dead at him.

He closed his jacket over him, grinning. She slammed the door and grabbing the boy's hand, scuttled away.

Doug swiped, zipped, tossing the towel over the seat. He started the car and pulled out, heading toward Route 130 South and Camden.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, his hand roaming for his flask, “I am so fucked.”

* * * *

FIFTH DISTRICT, CITY OF CAMDEN POLICE DEPARTMENT

DETECTIVE UNIT

“Welland!”

He turned, scanning the length of the big room. Past the rows of desks, past the myriad detectives and their accompanying effluvia, stood Captain Halchak, his arms crossed, a scowl on his face.

“Yes, sir?”

“What are you doing here?”

Doug closed a desk drawer with his knee. “Just picking up a few things. Seen Stewart, by the way?”

“Stewart’s been reassigned for the duration.” The Captain backed into his office. “Now, get over here.”

Doug dropped some cuffs in his pocket, and swiveling around the desk, went to him.

“Did you see her?” Halchak said without preamble.

Doug closed the door but didn’t sit. “Yeah. This morning.”

“And?”

He cleared his throat. Just the thought of her shot an ache to his groin. “We didn’t really have time to talk.”

His brow raised. “But you’ll be getting together with her again,” he said, not as a question.

“She wants to.”

“You have to. Seems she really is in some deep shit.” He sat back. “I take it you’ve heard of Jack Falco.”

“The congressman? The one they call ‘the ladies’ choice’? Yeah, a big player. I think I even voted for him once or twice.”

Halchak snorted. “So you do take you head out of your ass sometimes.”

“Every now and then,” Doug said, dropping to a chair. “You know, after I’m done beating off to the porn sites.”

Another snort. “Anyway, he’s primed to toss his hat in the ring for governor next year.”

“Yeah? So what’s this got to do with Gina?”

He raised a brow. “I guess you really didn’t have time to talk. She’s his chief of staff.”

Now it was Doug’s turn at surprise. “Last I heard she was working for the DNC, you know, the Democratic Party, down in Washington.”

“You need to update your surveillance, bucko. She left them for K Street.” Halchak checked his screen again. “Says here that’s where she hooked up with Falco, lobbying for the DNA Identification Clearance Act, the bill he co-sponsored.”

His fists tightened. So that’s where she’d been, trailing after that show pony? He wanted to break the fucker’s neck. He shifted in the chair. “Again, what’s it got to do with Gina?”

“Falco, as you might know, has been trying for years to get DNA identification out there as normal procedure in capital cases. But it hasn’t made some people too happy. I’m sure you’ve heard of prisoners locked up for years, getting their DNA analyzed, and it proves them innocent. Well, Gina Bardone has defended about a dozen or so of these cases, and every one of them got sprung.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Doug mumbled.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Halchak eyed him, but continued. “Anyway, that’s what brought her and Falco together, more or less. That’s what also made Gina more visible. And more of a target.”

Doug leaned forward in his chair. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying someone wants to kill her.”

His breath caught; it was still there. He wanted to choke the life out of anyone even threatening a hair on her head. His hands gripped the armrests. “You’d better explain yourself, Captain.”

Halchak eyed him coolly; it was clear he’d been tested by far worse. “So far, all it’s been is e-mails. But there’s a big rally coming up this Sunday where Falco’s officially announcing he’s running for governor, and they figured this is where whoever’s threatening her will make their move. Because of his impending announcement, the state police will give him protection if he wants it, especially because of this rally. So he’s got a plainclothes out with him for all public appearances.”

“Wait a minute.” The image of Gina with his pistol took on new meaning. “You mean that bastard gets protection but he’ll just let her hang?”

“He’s not letting her hang. Since Camden – and Riverboro, where the rally’s going to be – falls into Falco’s congressional district, he can get her local protection. She got to pick and she picked you.” Halchak’s phone rang. “Now, every second you wait, you leave her exposed. I suggest you get to it.” He turned to the ringing phone. Doug stood up, summarily dismissed.

He left the Captain’s office in a daze. *She picked you.* It made a good story. He could almost believe it. Yet no matter how much he still hurt, the thought of anyone out to harm Gina nearly sent him into a blind rage. He had no choice. He had to go to her. And once he did, if this afternoon were any indicator, he knew there was no way he could keep himself from her.

Doug snaked through the rows of desks in the Detective Unit, passing his own and Stewart’s, both vacant for the foreseeable future, and took the elevator to the basement. He walked the long hallway to the last door at the end – *Forensics*, it said, *Lateesha Ibayah, MD, DO.*

She was a strikingly lovely woman with deep green eyes and a luscious full mouth, and Doug always wondered why she chose to keep herself hidden in the basement laboratory of a police station, dealing with bodies and blood smears. She was at her

computer, working on one report or another, the light from her desk lamp illuminating her coffee-colored skin, the lab coat draped over her chair allowing him to appreciate the generous curves of her rigorously toned body. When she saw him approach, she looked up and winked, Doug smiling with long-overcome regret, remembering a time when he was just a bit in love with her.

She leaned back in her chair. “Well, well, look who it is. Hey, party boy.”

Doug sunk his hands into his pockets. How could he ask her this? He could hardly think it, let alone say it, but he knew he had to. And somehow he knew she’d understand. “Listen, Doc...I need a favor.”

“As if I’m not busy enough!” Then she laughed, shaking her head “Oh, all right, where’s the body?”

“No body. This time it’s personal.” He shrugged, unusually abashed. “Look, I don’t know how to put this, but I haven’t been, well...Okay, let me just say my choice of female company lately hasn’t been—”

“Um hm, the kind you can bring home to mama. Hmm...I see perfectly, Dougie. And let me guess.” She stuck a slender finger to her chin. “There’s this girl you just met, and you’d like to—”

“In ways even you can’t even imagine.” He pressed his knuckles to her desk. “So, can you give me some tests on the QT?”

“Oh, Dougie,” she said, sliding up her sleeves as she rose from the desk, “I’ll even do it myself.” She crossed to a cabinet, pulling out blood collection tubes, needles and a rubber tourniquet. “Have a seat, Lieutenant. When I’m done with you, there won’t be a fluid of yours unexamined or a disease left to rule out.” As she jabbed the needle in, he winced. “Oh yeah, I’m going to enjoy the hell out of this.”

* * * *

HOLLY HOUSE INN – RIVERBORO

THURSDAY 29 OCTOBER

Gina stumbled toward the door, wrapping her robe around her. Logic assured her

if the killers were coming they'd hardly knock. Still, she had mace in her pocket and a steak knife from the tiny kitchen in her hand.

"Who is it?" she said, her heart pounding.

"It's me," Doug answered. "Open up."

Relief washed over her, but so did reluctance. Obviously, he still wanted her, but was it possible he still cared? The very thought of it left her breathless, and perplexed by what to do next. She laid her cheek against the door, her hand on the knob. "So you don't hate me after all?"

She heard him sigh heavily. "Just open up."

Chapter Three

HOLLY HOUSE INN – RIVERBORO

THURSDAY 29 OCTOBER

When Gina opened the door, her heart leaped as it always did when she saw him. But Doug wasn't looking at her; he was looking at the knife in her hand. He grabbed her wrist.

"If I were coming for you, doll," he said, the blade dangling between them, "do you really think this would stop me?"

He was inches from her, her robe half-opened, exposing the marks of the day before. *So this was the way he was playing it*, she thought. She dropped the knife, glaring at him. "Are you coming for me, Doug?"

The hand at her wrist tightened. He pulled her to him, his body taut with tension. "What do you want from me?"

Gina wrenched herself loose, clasping the front of her robe. "I thought I wanted your help. Now I'm not so sure."

His eyes, deep blue in the thin light, wavered. "Yeah, you are or you wouldn't have opened the door. So start talking. I'm all ears."

She always marveled how he could shift from hot to cold with such breathtaking efficiency, but this time it irritated her. "Why, sure. The hell with preliminaries. Let's get right down to business."

His mouth crooked. "You thinking maybe we should go to Serious Joe first? I could buy you a latte, maybe some scones? We could reminisce over old times."

Gina laughed harshly. "Maybe we should. Then maybe after, you could get on with your life."

Doug's face went scarlet, his lips stretching into a thin, tremulous line, and for a scant second, Gina thought he would hit her. "Oh, come on, sweetheart, you could do a

hell of a lot better than that.”

Didn’t she know it. Because hadn’t she been obsessing over this moment for days? Weeks? Maybe even for the last two years? Ever since that night in his hospital room. How it nearly killed both of them when she walked out the door. But thinking of that wouldn’t help her now.

She met his gaze. “Look, I know you don’t give a damn about me, but I had this crazy idea I could still trust you no matter what’s happened between us. Because underneath, I always figured you a good cop who still gave a damn about finding the bad guys. But I guess I was wrong.”

His eyes narrowed; she could almost hear his inner calculator clicking. After a few moments, he slid his hands into his pockets. “Then go ahead. Start from the top. I’m listening.”

She relaxed, if only marginally. Because for the next few minutes she fully intended to believe she was only the congressional aide and Doug was nothing more than a local cop. And if she played it straight, if she hit all the right notes, she might believe it long enough to walk out of the room unscathed. Then she looked at him.

Who was she kidding?

“Excuse me a minute,” she said, escaping to the bedroom.

Gina closed the door and threw off her robe and nightgown. Half-naked was no way to play it with Doug. Yet as she slid on underwear, jeans and a sweater, she knew she could be encased in concrete and if Doug wanted her, he’d find a way to get her. In fact, that was exactly what she was counting on. She shivered, feeling his heat from the other room. She ran to scrub her teeth and face and drag a brush through her hair, catching herself in the bathroom mirror. Her sweater just covered his marks at the swell of her breasts, her hair the one he’d left on her neck. She closed her eyes, her heart kicking up at the thought of him. *Can’t do that now*, she told herself. I have to keep a clear head, if only for Jack’s sake. She dug into her purse, pulling out a wad of papers, grabbed her BlackBerry, and returned to the living room.

He stood at the mantel of the little fireplace, scrolling through his phone. Good God, Gina thought, he was so – *big*. Not freakishly big, just six-foot-two or -three, perhaps. But next to her, who just came to his shoulders in bare feet, his heady mix of height and muscle, his voice a growl of raw, roughened silk. She recalled the timbre of it in her ear and how it made her pulse race, and now with him so.... She shivered again. Jesus, he could crush her with one hand. He looked over, shooting her a quick up-and-down.

“So you work for Jack Falco,” he said impassively.

Inwardly, she sighed. She knew him well enough to know it chafed at him, but she was also aware he’d hardly own up to it. “Yes. I met him in D.C. when I was lobbying for his bill.”

“The DNA Identification Clearance Act.”

That surprised her. “You know it?” she said, sliding to the sofa.

“Halchak told me.”

“Ah.” She watched him cross to the chair and sit down. So it was a good move, approaching his captain first. At this stage he’d certainly want confirmation on anything she’d tell him. “I’d been heading the prison reform group Stop the Loop—”

“The anti-recidivism project.”

“Yes.” Again, she was surprised. But how silly. There was a huge federal prison in Camden. “I guess I must have impressed him, because when the bill passed, he asked me to come work for him.”

“As his chief of staff.”

He *had* done his homework. “Quite a coup, because he was planning on running for governor. Because part of my agreement was if he won, he’d carry the position into his administration.” She reached for a piece of paper in her lap. “Then last summer, some sicko sent him this.”

Doug took the paper, a reprint of an email from yourbigfan2010: *There’s still a Death Penalty in NJ for SOME people.*

He looked up. “What’s the trace?”

“An Internet cafe in Philadelphia from a Yahoo account.”

“Were there more?”

“No, so we pretty much ignored it. He’d gotten random crazy stuff before. But when I began getting some press as his chief, they started coming to me.” She reached for another slip. “There was this one.” *DNA = do not arrest*. “Again from the same Yahoo account, from a guest computer at a conference center in Cherry Hill.” She dropped some more to the sofa space between them, grateful for the few feet of demilitarized zone. As Doug shuffled through them, she added, “They’re all the same, all referring to the Clearance Act, all sent to the Congressional District office’s e-mail from public, untraceable computers.”

Doug picked up the last one. “*Liberty for NONE and Justice for ALL.*” He tossed it back to the sofa. “Well, it’s obvious enough. Someone was pissed because the Act helped someone get sprung. You had to expect it.” He sat back in the chair, splaying his legs slightly.

She crossed her own. “Sure. But I never expected it to get so personal.”

“What was that Tip O’Neill said?” He thought a moment. “‘All politics is local.’ That’s how this guy felt. Falco wrote that bill to screw *him*, not to free people incarcerated falsely. For *him* it got personal, and you were the ones who sprung them. But that’s not why I’m here. What I want to know is” – he leaned into her – “how it got so personal toward you.”

His eyes were back, steely and crystalline. Gina picked up the BlackBerry and went to e-mail and, finding the first message, handed it to Doug. “These were sent to my e-mail account.”

He glanced at the screen. *Sometimes People get in the way.*

His eyes flared.

Gina’s heart skipped. That one infinitesimal gesture said it all. He *did* still care – he had to. Because if he didn’t, it’d surely be over for her.

“How did he get your address?” he said quietly.

“I have it on my card. It’d be easy enough.”

His jaw tightened. “Show me more.”

She took the BlackBerry from him, scrolled some more and handed it back. “Then there was this.” *Sometimes the Bullet misses the target and people get hurt.* She got up and, leaning over his shoulder, scrolled to the next. “Then this.” *Sometimes the Worst things happen even with your friends all around you.*

Doug’s hands reddened, his fingers tightening. “He’s referring to the rally. When is it?”

“Sunday. In front of the county courthouse here in Riverboro. It’s his hometown, so he wants to go back to his roots.” Her eyes softened with admiration. “The outgoing governor is coming to formally throw his support to Jack, as well as both senators and a few more representatives from neighboring districts. There’s also going to be a coalition of victims’ rights advocates and their supporters.”

“Which will surely bring out this wacko.”

“Which is why I need you.” She slid the BlackBerry from him again, scrolling once more. “Especially because of this. Because before he was vague. This time, he gets a little more direct.” *Such a shame to break those lovely, long legs; slit that pretty little throat; put a bullet into that filthy brain.*

He thrust it back at her. “You’re not going.”

She nearly laughed. “What do you mean? Of course I am. I have to.”

“Are you kidding?” He stood up, looming over her, the chair between them. “With this kind of threat, you’re nothing but a target.”

“So I’ll keep moving. But I’ll be there.”

He swiveled around the chair. “Do you have some kind of death wish?”

Every instinct in her was on fire. “Are you telling me you care?”

A vein in his temple twitched. “Not a bit, doll. I’m talking purely professionally.”

“Then professionally speaking, you know I have to go. So take this job, keep an eye on the crazies and allow me do mine.”

“An outside rally? You’re just asking for it.”

She lowered her gaze and back. “I’ll be fine. I’ll have Superman watching out for me.”

“Maybe you won’t.”

“Won’t I?” She tilted into him, playing her trump. “Ah, c’mon, Doug. You can’t help yourself.”

It was like a bomb went off in his head. His eyes flared and he seized her mouth with his, his hand sliding under her ass to lift her to the back of the chair.

“You’re right, goddamn it, I can’t keep my hands off you.” He kissed a line down her throat to the swell of her breasts. “You’re like a goddamned addiction.”

She hooked her finger into the knot of his tie and undoing it, tossed it to the floor, flicking a few shirt buttons open to kiss the pulse point thumping wildly at his neck. “Oh, I’ve missed you,” she whispered, his hands kneading her back, her tongue trailing to his ear. She flicked it and he flinched against her, his fiery-hot hand snaking under her sweater to her breasts, her nipples hardening instantly. She kissed her way back to his mouth and fell into it, his tongue lacing into hers so intensely it made her head spin.

“A serious addiction...” he whispered, sliding his lips to her neck. He bared her shoulder, his mouth trailing kisses down the slope of it.

She tossed her head back, lolling in the bliss. How she had missed the scent, the feel, the sight of him. She slid her hands past his neck and into his jacket, his own hands lifting just long enough to let it slide to the floor. But it was hardly enough. She wanted the saltiness of his skin on her lips, his musky taste in her mouth. She raised her head and caught him looking at her, a hunger in his eyes, a rising urgency in his breath. She kissed him quickly then slid from the top of the chair.

“Where you going, doll?” he asked thickly, but he’d know soon enough. She nuzzled his shoulder, his arms still around her as she slowly undid his shirt, easing him

around until he braced against the back of the chair.

She spread his shirt until it, too, fell with his holster to the floor, nearly gasping at the taut, muscular expanse of his chest. Then she saw it, near his right breast, precariously close to his heart. It was fading, far from the angry, gaping wound it was when she'd last seen it, knowing it was her fault it was there. She could feel his eyes on her as she brushed her fingers over it, felt his hand fall to her hip when she raised up and lightly kissed it. She lay her head against his chest, feeling his heart pounding, thinking back to the night when that same sound was just a hope. She took in his scent, his breathing as it rose and fell. God, how she wanted him, feeling his abs tighten as her hand wandered down the hard ridges to his belt. She looked up at him; he was still watching her. How could she ever tell him what she had to? Maybe if he still loved her, it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe if she kept trying, he'd remember how much he loved her. She unbuckled his belt and easing down his zipper, fell to her knees.

His fingers tangled in her hair as she lowered his cock to her mouth. He still smelled of soap, and she wondered if he had come straight from his shower expecting this, and that thrilled her. Her tongue reached out and she flicked him; his fingers tightened. When she circled his head with her tongue, she could feel his nails digging into her scalp. With her other hand she cupped his balls, rolling them between her fingers. She flicked again, once, twice, sliding her hand over his hard, firm ass. He groaned. She flicked some more, circled once, twice, three times, gently kneading his balls, his cock throbbing in time with her clit. Little electric stabs sparked her groin as she mouthed the head of his cock, pulling, tugging. His ass tightened under her hand, her panties soaking through to her jeans. Then she rose up on her knees and, widening her mouth, took him as far as she could down her throat.

"Gina!" he cried, grabbing handfuls of her hair as she sucked him, her tongue flicking wildly on each return. His balls were as hard as granite in her hand, his cock a pulsing firebrand in her mouth, so hot and wet she thought it would singe her lips. But still she sucked, faster and harder and with a rising, half-crazed need – Jesus – she wanted

him inside her so badly. She grabbed his hips, digging her fingers into his already fevered skin. If she could swallow him whole she would.

“Doug...” she moaned, sliding kisses up the length of his cock, “I want you so badly I could just—”

He yanked her to her feet, kissing her with manic force, all tongue and lips and the same overpowering need. Before she could think, he had her twisted around and against the sofa. In one swift movement, he unzipped her jeans and slid them from her, her panties following. Then just as quickly, they were falling to the cushions, his mouth on hers.

“Finish me,” he breathed, Gina panting atop him. He kissed her cheek, her neck, his slickened cock pulsing against her bush. “And let me taste you while you’re doing it.”

“Doug, but I—” But he had already twisted her around, sliding her to him, his massive cock begging release just inches from her mouth, his own latching onto her pussy.

“Oh!” Her hips bucked as he flicked her clit, his finger sinking into her vagina. Gina felt her eyes roll back in her head as her body started to tremor, pleasure radiating from her insides out as he pumped her, sucked her, flicked her mercilessly. She looked down, nearly blinded with rising bliss, when suddenly she seized his cock, her back arching as she bent to him. Then she opened her throat him down. and took

She heard his head thump against the armrest, his body jerk as she sucked and circled, as relentlessly as he’d done her only moments before. Within a second he was back at her and she was coming – momentarily, voluminously – her body quivering with a pleasure only heightened by Doug’s. She swallowed spasm after spasm, each one adding another glorious explosion to her own. On and on it went until finally Doug fell away and Gina let go, his cock slipping from her lips as she collapsed breathlessly against his thigh.

“Jesus,” Doug sighed, stilling. After a few seconds Gina felt his hands at her hips,

twisting her toward him. “Hey, doll...come here.”

She slinked around, straddling him, her pussy moistening his belly. Funny how he’d always called her *doll*; he tossed her around like one. A funny-looking doll with her hair in tangles and her sweater askew, her only piece of clothing left on. She pulled it off and looked down at him: shirt off, trousers around his hips, shoes and socks still firmly on. Kind of silly when she was so naked. He raised a finger to her navel, circling it before he traced a line to one breast, his hand opening to weigh its heaviness, then continuing on to her neck, her cheek, tracing the line of her jaw to her lips, thumbing first the lower then the upper. His hand cupped her chin.

“Gina,” he whispered.

She slid to his side and he spooned against her, their arms and legs tangling around each others. He brushed her hair back from her face and kissed her neck, his breath warm and sweet against her skin. She laced her fingers into his and, holding them against her heart, let herself fall asleep with nothing between them except the truth.

* * * *

Doug awoke with Gina’s taste in his mouth. He opened his eyes, blinked, focusing on the room. She was gone. He ran a hand over his head, spiking his hair. A cold dread washed over him. Jesus, she couldn’t just leave! Then he heard shower water raining and he exhaled, a slow, cleansing breath. He rolled from the sofa, gravitating toward it. Through the crack in the door he saw her, shadowed by the translucent curtain. Her neck was arched into the water, her arms raised and fingers sank into her scalp as she shampooed her hair. He hardened instantly. He dropped the last of his clothes and slid the shower curtain back.

She froze, gasping slightly before her mouth crooked. “What took you so long, sailor?”

He growled something she couldn’t hear, and stepped in.

His insides squeezed as he saw her standing there, all slick and soapy, her long, chestnut hair a foamy tangle as rivulets of water snaked around her breasts, down her

belly and into the dark triangle of her pussy. He pulled her to him, kissing her deeply, his fingers lacing into her hair as her lush, full breasts pressed against the hardness of his. She arched her neck back and let the water rinse her, the stream straightening her long curls until the weight of the water pulled her hair halfway down her back. He kissed her neck, her shoulder, the tip of a nipple. When he pulled it into his mouth and nipped her, she bucked against him, raking her nails in an electric line down his back.

That was all he needed.

He pressed her against the wall, his mouth seizing hers. He bit her lip, the corner of her mouth, his hand splaying around her breast, his hard length immobilizing her. She squirmed against him but it was useless; she wasn't going anywhere unless he allowed it. His hand slid down her thigh, his fingers pinching her clit. She jolted, crying out, and he laughed low and sultry as he flicked it, his index sliding into a slit already moist and slick and so hot he felt singed. As her clit went rigid against his hand, he teased it, sliding his fingers around it, slipping his hands to the firm mounds of her ass. He lifted her, her legs instantly wrapping around him, her clit lightly resting atop the long shaft of his erect cock.

"Jesus, Doug," she said breathily, her hands pressed against his chest, her eyes half-masted with desire. She squirmed in his grasp, her clit a hard, pulsing knob.

He kissed her neck, swirling the bar of soap around her pussy. Then he began to move.

If there was cruelty involved, it was only self-inflicted. Because with this warm, wet goddess in his hands, her voluptuous breasts rising and falling with her quickening breaths, her skin like velvet and pungent with arousal, all he wanted to do was sink his cock into her pussy until he touched her womb, until his balls pounded against her, until her climax squeezed his own clean out of him. But he just couldn't. Which only frenzied him more.

What the fuck was he doing?

He stared at her, this luscious woman in his arms, half-wondering if she were real

or this was just some waking nightmare he'd walked into because Jesus Christ – didn't she once nearly drive him out of his mind? Yet here she was, softly moaning against him and he was crazy for her and wanting more, with as bad a jones as any junkie.

"Gina," he growled.

With his cock against her pulsing clit he slid her back and forth, the water raining between them slickening the slide. She groaned, arching, gripping his shoulders as his shaft teased her clit with such savagery her body fairly pulsed. Back and forth he slid himself, from the cleft of her ass, across her slippery pussy, to the tangle of her bush. She felt exquisite, she looked beautiful, and he couldn't believe how he had actually survived two years without her. She writhed, moaning as Doug's fingers dug into her cheeks, and he didn't know how much longer he could take it. His legs were weakening, his groin was tightening, the urge to sink himself into her so overwhelming he pulled back, pressing the glistening head of his cock against her clit. Suddenly she cried out, spasming against him. He thought he would explode with ecstasy.

He held her body against his, his cock between their bellies as she bit his shoulder, riding out her orgasm, and just as suddenly, he was coming too, shooting a gallon between her breasts. She was still coming when he pulled her up and caught her mouth, kissing her wildly. His come had slid over her skin, erupting over the curve of her breasts and around her nipples. He kissed her once more then leaned her back, Gina bracing her hands against the wall as he held her into the shower's rain, a sated yet questioning look on her face. He lowered her to her feet.

He didn't want to answer anything. He just took her in his arms, kissed her and, grabbing the bar of soap, washed her body, smiling with satisfaction when again, the brush of his hands made her erupt. They still had it, he knew.

So he shouldn't have been surprised. Not when they stepped from the shower, when he toweled her long hair, when they took turns drying each other, when he rubbed lotion all over her body and watched her skin glow under his touch, when he dropped to his knees and tongued her almost to the point of amnesia. But not quite. Because after

they dressed, after she had slipped into a tailored suit and he'd slipped into his holster, as they sat across from each other at the little table with coffee mugs between them, just as he was about to slip into official police procedural mode and drill her about the case, she slid her spoon from her mug to the table and, setting her sherry-colored eyes on him, said, "Okay, Doug, let's get it over with."

Chapter Four

HOLLY HOUSE INN

Doug glared at her from over his coffee. “You want me to say it? Okay.” The mug hit the table with a thud. “You kicked me in the balls when I was half-dead, then you walked out on me. There. Out in the open.”

“I didn’t walk out,” Gina said. “You threw me out.”

Doug pushed up from the table. “Merely a technicality. You were on your way out anyway.”

She rose to meet him. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“Ah, sure you did. You always have a choice.”

“No.” She looked away, drawing into herself. “Sometimes you don’t.”

She could see it even now, as she stood in that tiny kitchen with Doug so close and the heat between them barely banked – that horrible day two and a half years ago. She had been out on the West Coast for nearly two weeks, fielding regional leaders for the primary, part of her new job as assistant to the vice chair of the Democratic National Committee. She was a rising star in the DNC, the feisty former trial lawyer with insatiable ambition and indefatigable energy. But that morning when she stepped off the red-eye, all she wanted to do was collapse into her lover’s arms. Maybe for the last time.

She had known Doug only a couple of months, but she knew that she’d fall hard for the hard-boiled police detective from the moment he hit the witness chair at the trial that would end her career as a defense attorney. The trial took two weeks, but as soon as it – and their conflict of interest – was over, they scrambled to the nearest hotel, barely making it into the room before he’d ripped off her panties and fucked her right atop the credenza. And with such deadly force, Gina’s screaming had security at their door within minutes.

“I-I’m fine – I am!” she half-laughed, half-panted out, Doug’s cock still ramming her.

“Yeah, go away or I’ll call the cops!” Doug yelled, bending to add breathlessly in her ear, “Not that they aren’t already coming.”

“Are they? Shit! Doug!” Gina arched up, ready to shove him off when Doug laced his tongue into her ear and she was gone in a wave of bliss, his cock emptying itself inside her.

“Goddamn,” Doug breathed, collapsing against her. “That wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“Especially when I have three dozen Trojans in my purse,” Gina said, her hand on his ass. *And God – what an ass!* she thought, her fingers smoothing it.

He lifted up. “Oh well, if it turns out you’re pregnant, I’ll just have to marry you.”

Gina stared at him. “You’re joking, right?”

“Doll,” he said, pulling the combs from her hair, his eyes like twin chunks of blue ice, “anyone who can make me come like you just did has my undying loyalty, not to mention...” He slipped his hands under her blouse and quickly split it, her buttons flying off. Gina barely had time to gasp before he unsnapped her bra, letting her breasts tumble out and swooping to take an already hardened nipple between his teeth. “You’ve got three days of payback fucking coming at you for winning that case,” he said, sucking her nipple until she groaned against him.

Winning that case. And she *had* won, by any means necessary. Including compromise, even of herself. Disgust washed over her. When had winning become more important than even her self respect? She should have known whatever conscience she had left would still come back to haunt her, extracting its inevitable price.

Oh God, she thought as she drove to Doug’s apartment, what I wouldn’t give for those three first days of voluntary amnesia. She laughed with twenty-twenty hindsight. *Of abject, blissful stupidity.* She pulled his key from her purse and stepped into the pre-dawn inkiness inside.

It was almost like following his scent. She snaked around furniture and his strewn

shoes to find him still in bed, his arms thrown over his head as he lay on his back, his legs tangled in a sheet that barely covered the dark-blond thatch nesting his cock. She set her bag to the floor with a sign. He was such a gorgeous man. Broad shoulders, muscled arms, tight pecs and abs like granite, and those eyes! A shade of blue she'd never seen in nature and so intense, they were just as riveting whether mired in lust or lit with the thousand different topics that filled their conversations, from politics to cooking to movies to law, to the shape of her breast, to the angle his chin took as he kissed her. He shifted, groaning slightly, and her heart twisted. God, how she loved him, inside and out. She slithered out of her clothes and slipped in to spoon behind him.

“About time,” he said, grasping her hand.

She started. “You’re awake?”

“Doll, I’m a cop. Of course I’m awake. And with my finger on the trigger.” His hand snaked from under his pillow, and he slid his pistol to the night table. “I wondered how long you were gonna stand there staring at me.”

Gina felt herself flush. “Sorry. It’s just that—”

“You missed me?” he said, turning around. He pushed himself up, half-arching over her. “Same here.”

As he slipped the sheet from her she rolled on her back, his eyes grazing appreciatively over her. Inwardly, she thrilled. If these last few weeks with Doug had proved anything, it was he thought her beautiful, and that made her body bloom. Her lips felt lusher, her breasts fuller, her skin so much more sensitive to his touch. At least, that was what she wanted to believe. As she lay naked before him, his gaze thick upon her, she could already feel herself rising. All he had to do was touch her and sure enough, she’d explode.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” he said, mischief in his eyes as he traced a finger down her belly. “So beautiful, I want to eat you for breakfast.”

“You do, do you?” she said, brow arched, squirming when his finger met her clit. “But I’m not so—”

“Shh.” He quieted her with a kiss, his lips roaming down her neck, from one breast to the next, before he slid his tongue down her belly to her pussy. “Are you trying to tell me what to eat?”

She smiled, slipping her hand to his mouth. He sucked in a finger, nipping it. “It’s just that I should take a shower. It’s been a long night.”

“Don’t care,” he said, opening her legs as he slid down between them. “I can’t wait that long and besides, I love the way you taste.”

“Well, all right then,” she said, her neck arching as his tongue found her clit. “Who am I to argue?”

He spread her lips, barely flicking against her clit as a finger slipped into the fiery canal of her vagina. Then he drew it back, feeling for that high and inner spot she knew always drove her half out of her mind. He did this over and over, easing in and out of her pussy while mercilessly teasing her clit, until it throbbed and hardened against his tongue. Gina moaned, squirming as she fisted the sheets, Doug splaying her even wider as he pulled her to the edge of the bed and her sanity.

“Pull your legs up,” he said, his kissing her inner thigh.

“What? Oh no, Doug, please...” Gina pleaded, barely coherent as his dripping fingers slipped in and out of her swollen vagina.

“Like this,” he said, pushing up until her heels rested on the end of the mattress. “That’s it,” he said, his hands searing her thighs as he opened her. He licked her periphery, his breath hot against her skin, her ass writhing as he pursed his lips and blew softly against her throbbing clit.

“Fuck me,” she begged, but he only pushed her legs back until her knees nearly met her breasts, the engorged whole of her pussy raw and exposed and completely at his mercy. “Doug! Goddamn it – do some—”

When his mouth fell upon her she nearly screamed, his tongue as manic against her clit as it had been *laissez-faire* before. Almost instantly she broke into a sweat, her ass lifting off the bed as a climax tore through her body.

“Like that?” She heard the packet tear, and climbing to the bed, he rammed his cock in to the hilt.

This time she did scream, stunned by the most intense pleasure she’d ever felt. He drove his cock in and out, shackling her wrists over her head with one large hand.

“Did you miss me, Gina?” he said, driving her harder with every thrust. “Did you think about me fucking you?”

“Yes,” she whispered, hardly able to speak. She was coming again, this time even harder than before, her head thrashing, her hips bucking to meet his. “Oh yes – all the time – all the – *ah...*”

“Really?” he said, those eyes cool, yet burning right into her. Even through the haze of her pleasure she could see him clearly. With the dawn eking through the blinds, he looked as drunk on her as she felt on him, a sheen of sweat on his forehead, those powerful shoulder muscles flexing with each thrust, his lips curling around the edges of his imminent orgasm. He let go of her wrists, looking down on her. “That must mean you love me.”

She gripped his face between her hands. “Oh God, oh God!” She seized his mouth with hers as she wrapped her legs around him, Doug pummeling her once, twice before he went rigid from his climax, slumping against her.

A few moments later he brushed his cheek against hers. “Jesus, you can fuck.”

She laughed. “All I did was pretty much lie there.”

He smiled, shifting the weight of his large body off her. “Sometimes that’s all it takes.” He kissed her quickly. “Christ, I missed you.”

“Same here, sweetie,” she whispered, and again her heart twisted. How would she ever tell him?

He pulled himself from her, dropping the condom in the trash before he lifted her from his bed. “*Now* it’s time for a shower.” When they got in together, he soaped her from head to foot and fucked her again, holding her high against the shower wall, his legs splayed and hers around his hips. After they got out and they dried each other, and

he rubbed lotion all over her body, he hoisted her atop the sink and fucked her once more. Even in the bedroom she wasn't safe, because as she bent into her suitcase to find her jeans, he fell to his knees behind her and tongued her until she writhed and shook and fell to the bed.

"Holy – shit," she panted out, Doug behind and caging her with his leg, "You sure like to fuck me."

He pulled her hair back from her neck and kissed her pulse point. "I *love* to fuck you," he murmured. "So much I can't keep my cock out of you." He turned her to face him, his eyes tentative. "Is that insane or what?"

Those eyes – Jesus! how they tore through her. She couldn't look at him, snuggling against him instead, wishing she could crawl inside him and hide until he absorbed what she knew she'd have to tell him. "Maybe."

He kissed the top of her head. "Gina, baby, come on. You know it's more than that. I love you. I love you so fucking much I could die sometimes."

Damn, she hated it when he got gothic. Hated how it made her feel – as crazy paralyzed in love as he was, and she just couldn't allow herself that. Not when she had to do what she knew she must. Even thinking of it made her sick. She cringed against him.

He felt it. "Gina?" he said, lifting her chin. "What's the matter?"

She couldn't put it off any longer. She had to tell him. Because as odd as it seemed, in such a short span of time, he was so in tune with her, she was certain he already knew. "Doug, there's something I have to tell you."

He stared at her a moment before his eyes lit with joy. "You're pregnant."

Gina pulled back, the breath knocked out of her. She was right. Sometimes he positively terrified her. "Why did you say that?"

"Oh come on, Gina." His eyes swept over her. "Just look at you!" He brushed back her hair, gazing at her with such love she nearly collapsed. "We haven't known each other long, barely a few weeks with all the time we're apart, but I've never felt like this with anyone. I know it's crazy, but sometimes I think I can feel what you're feeling, know

what you're thinking, even before you say it."

She touched his cheek. God! she knew what he meant. Even knew what he was going to say next. Knew she couldn't bear to hear it.

"Gina," he said softly, "are you?"

She said, rhetorically, "Yes, but..."

"But *what*?" He smiled, absolutely beaming. "Marry me."

She shook her head. "Doug, I know you said that the first time we were together, but no one would expect to take that kind of offer seriously."

He grabbed her, kissing her neck, her cheek, then quickly on the lips. "I was as serious then as I am now. No. Even more. Because I'm so much more fucking in love with you than I was then, and let me tell you, that's a lot of goddamn love because I was insane for you from the minute I walked in that courtroom. Marry me, and let's raise our baby and maybe even ten more." He laughed. "I never had a real family, so this ought to be nuts, but what the fuck—"

"Doug." She shivered. Those eyes, so aquamarine and icy were positively drilling through her, mining her thoughts as easily as if they were his own. And Christ, if that didn't scare the hell out her. Because if they were, if he truly knew what she was thinking, she was honestly afraid neither one of them would live through the experience. She eased away from him and off the bed.

He didn't say anything as she hurried into her clothes, pulling his own on as a minute passed and the next round of revelations queued up before them. Finally, as she fumbled through her purse, he took her by the shoulders and turned her toward him, dipping his head to her upraised eyes.

"What is it?" he said simply.

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath before opening to his. "I can't marry you." *Ever. Not now. Not after this.*

His jaw clenched. "Why?"

"Because I can't. It's not right."

“What do you—”

“Because...” She wanted to say *because I love you too much*, but she couldn’t. She could never say that. If she did, if he knew what she’d done, it just might kill him. Lord knew it was killing her. “It isn’t fair.”

He gripped her arms. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

She moved away, flipping her hair from her face, a gesture long essential to her thought process. *Here it comes*, she told herself. She took a long, stabilizing breath, crossing her arms in front of him. “I can’t marry you just because of this – pregnancy.”

He stared at her a moment then sighed with what she hoped wasn’t relief. “Baby,” he said softly, “you want me to tell you again? I love you. And our baby—”

“*Don’t*,” she said, “say that.”

“What?” He truly looked clueless. “Say what?”

Her chest tightened. She didn’t know how much longer she could stand it. Gina felt the bile rising in her throat, a mix of hormones and anger and impatience for her heart to hurry up and finish breaking, so she could get on with whatever was left of her suitably now miserable life. But what was worse was that hers wouldn’t be the only heart she’d be breaking, the but also this man’s, whom she’d surely die for. But she also knew it couldn’t go any other way.

“I’m not keeping this baby,” she finally said.

His eyes narrowed in disbelief. “You can’t be serious.”

She had never been more serious. Her heart hammered in her chest, she felt dizzy, her legs threatened to buckle. But she had to hold her ground. *There was no alternative*. She was resigned. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He gripped her shoulders. “Gina, please, don’t do this. *Please* don’t do this. “He pulled her toward him, clutching her so tightly the breath caught in her lungs. “Tell me what you want from me, but please don’t do this.”

She closed her eyes against their stinging, his heart pounding against her cheek, his scent dizzying her thinking. “Doug, you have to stop. Trust me when I say I would

keep it if I could, but I just can't."

"Why?" he said softly. "Because of me?"

"No, no, no, of course not." She brushed her hand down his chest. *Lie. Lie. Lie.*
"If anything, I don't deserve you. But I'm not ready for this. I just can't do it."

He kissed the top of her head, each cheek, her forehead, his breath hot and frantic against her face. "I never knew my father, you know? Bastard took off on my mother, left us in some goddamn shithole." He held her face in his hands, staring down at her with such intensity Gina started to tremble. "But I'd never do that to you. I want to take care of you. I want to take care of—"

"Stop it, Doug," Gina said, pushing away. "I don't need anyone to take care of me."

"Why? You don't think I could do it?"

"I don't mean that."

"Then what *do* you mean? I couldn't take care of the kid?"

She waved him off. "That's not the point."

"Then what is?" He came toward her, hands fisted. "What's so fucking important you have to kill our baby?"

Her mouth dropped in outrage. "How dare you?"

"It's what you're gonna do, isn't it?"

Gina dropped to the bed, yanking on her boots, near blinded from welling tears. She turned away, swiping at her eyes. "You don't understand. Do you think I want to do this?"

He fell to a crouch in front of her, his face filled with anguish. "Then explain it to me, doll. I'll listen. I love you. I'd fucking die for you, so give me one good reason why we can't do this? If it's something you want me to do to make it easier, I'll do it. Just tell me what it is. *Please.*"

"You, you, you! Well, it's not just about you! *I* can't raise a kid now. Why won't you listen to me?" But she could hardly hear herself; her head was spinning so. How had

she let it get this far out of control? Gina looked at him, and in that one glance, it nearly killed her. She had never seen him like this. Her icy cool detective was teetering on the brink. To prolong it was monstrous. She climbed from the bed.

“I have to go,” she said. “We’ll talk about it when I get back.”

He looked at her as if she were insane. “Are you joking?”

“I’m due in D.C. by one.”

He leapt to his feet, grasping her arm. “Fuck D.C.! You’re not going anywhere until we get this thing settled!”

“There’s nothing to settle,” she said, twisting her arm loose, the words flying out of her mouth so foreign to what she was feeling she almost laughed. “I’m sorry, Doug, I’m so, so sorry, but I can’t keep this pregnancy, I just can’t.”

“Why?” He slammed his hand against the wall, his face red, livid. “I’m a goddamn cop and you’re a fucking lawyer! We make enough goddamned money together to support ten families. Give me one solid reason why we can’t have this baby! Just one logical reason why and I swear to God I’ll leave you the fuck alone! Just *one*!”

One reason? Just one? If he only knew. *It was logic that got us here in the first place.* “Doug, you know it’s got nothing to do with money.”

“Then what is it? Tell me!” His cell rang; he ignored it, grabbing her arms. “Come on, doll. You always had the answers before.”

There was only one, and if she told him it’d kill them both. She started to shake. “I can’t – you don’t – Doug, please.”

His cell rang again from where it lay on the bed. She could see it was his partner, Carmelli. Still, he still ignored it, his fingers digging into her arms. “Come on, Gina,” his voice seethed, pulling her flat against him. “Stop fucking with me and give it to me straight.”

She stared at him, his whole body coiled with anguish, and if there were a time when she hated herself more, she couldn’t remember it. She felt sick with a guilt she knew she’d carry with her until the end. His house phone rang.

“You’d better answer that,” she said.

“Answer *me*,” he insisted. “Don’t you think I can handle it?”

Could he really? Gina looked into eyes bleeding misery and a kind of wildness she’d never seen in him before. It terrified her. She tried to pull away; he gripped her tighter. She couldn’t tell him – *ever*. He would never believe how devious she was, how the art of the deal really worked, how winning had always trumped the method. She could never live up to his standards. And when he realized that, he would hate her – hate her with everything inside him, and she could never take that.

“Let go,” she said.

He shook her slightly. “Tell me!”

Someone started pounding at his door, and when he looked toward it, she wrenched herself loose. God, she loved him. Loved him more than she ever felt herself capable, so much she’d die for him as well. But she wouldn’t kill him. Knowing the truth would surely do that. So she channeled her courtroom demeanor, affecting her iciest veneer, and as every part of her shattered inside, she looked to the only man she’d ever love – and lied with every fabric of her being.

“It’s not complicated. It’s just not the right time. And—” She nearly choked.

“And *what*?” he growled, his eyes wild.

She was shaking. *Lie. Lie. Lie.* “I don’t love you,” she said, and grabbing her suitcase, bolted for the door.

“*What*?” he said, stepping back.

When Gina flung open the door, two uniforms were behind it; she squeezed past. “Lt. Welland?” said an officer, “You got to come. Your partner’s under fire.”

Gina was getting into her car. Gina was starting it.

“Over on Birch. Six perps in an abandoned house, one with a baby. Maniac’s dangling it out the window.”

“Jesus Christ...” he breathed, watching her pull away.

They’re dead, they’re all dead... Hours later he awoke in the hospital, his body

convulsing as he came out of the anesthesia. It was all he could think of, acres of little rubber corpses, tiny fists frozen in a perennial clutch, their mouths gaping in permanent supplication. The worst was he didn't care; he'd never care again. Because it'd never happen again.

He was freezing, his teeth chattering, his chest feeling like he was caught under a car crusher. Through his foggy vision he could see the nurse tucking the blanket around him, shooting something into his IV. Then another face appeared before him, like floating in the air, like an angel. He felt himself smiling. *She's so beautiful.* She smiled back, squeezing his hand.

"Doug," she whispered, tears streaming down her face. She bent to kiss him, her lips the softest thing he ever felt. "They said you're going to be okay. They told me."

He closed his eyes, remembering the scent of her, the feel, her breasts against his chest, the silk of her hair, her taste, deep down. For a moment or two he was lost in reverie, sinking himself into her, spilling himself inside her. *Spilling, spilling, spilling...* His eyes opened.

"Get...out." he whispered.

She clutched his hand, startled. "Doug, sweetie—"

"Get..." He tried to push himself up, falling back in a wrack of pain. "Get...the fuck...out."

"Doug!"

The nurse put a hand on her shoulder. "It's just the anesthesia. Don't take him seriously."

Somehow Doug pushed himself up on one elbow. He looked to the nurse, his head spinning but his mind never clearer. "Get her out...of here. *Now.*"

Gina palmed a hand to her chest, her face frantic with fear. "Doug, let's forget about what I said before. We can think about that later. All we need to do now is get you well and—"

"*Get her the fuck out of here!*" he screamed, then promptly passed out. When he

woke up hours later, she was gone.

* * * *

Gina took the cups from the table, setting them into the tiny sink.

“What was it? Did you know?” Doug asked, his voice flat.

She often wondered herself, feeling the old choking coming back. She clenched her eyes, steeling herself. “It was too early. Anyway, what does it matter? I had a miscarriage the next day.”

“I know. Carmelli told me. But somehow it seems important now.”

She was grateful he couldn’t see her. She swallowed hard. “Well, it isn’t. What is important is someone’s threatening to kill me.” She ran water into the cups and washed them, the simple act seeming to turn a page. “There’s a fundraiser tonight at the Liberty Ballroom in Cherry Hill. Black tie.” She turned. “Do you have a tux?”

He sat back, his mouth crooking, the mood miraculously lightening. “Of course. Doesn’t everyone?”

Her mouth crooked as well. “Why do I have the impression you’re lying?”

He stood. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Can I ask where?” she said, grabbing her purse.

“That’s your call, doll. I’m just the hired help.”

“Maybe we ought to remember that.”

“And maybe the Republicans will hire Michael Moore as their spokesperson.”

Gina laughed out loud. “Why, Douglas, I do believe you have unexpected depth.”

“A little later, you’re sure to find out,” he said, closing the door behind them.

Chapter Five

DEMOCRATIC PARTY FUNDRAISER

LIBERTY BALLROOM – CHERRY HILL, NJ

Gina leaned into the mirror and blotted her lipstick, glancing down. Jesus, from this angle, her tits fairly popped out of her bodice. She grinned. So that's why Doug's eyes had near done the same when she stooped to get out of the limo. She straightened, brushing back a hair that had found its way out her uptwist. Good Lord, how she loved the way he reacted to her.

Right now she knew he was somewhere outside the ladies' room, lurking in the shadows as he had all day, his tux showing off his body in no way she had over seen. How did he do it? She couldn't help feeling smug about the way women reacted to him, a couple on the way in almost stuttering when she introduced him, their obvious jealousy barely masked. *Sorry, girlfriends, he's mine*, she wanted to yell. But was he? She smoothed the organza of her gown. Too early to say. She sighed and left for the ballroom.

Gina entered into a cacophony of light and sound and music and it made her smile. On top was such a lovely place to be, and besides, with or without the victories, it had to be a well-known fact that Democrats were simply more *fun* than the GOP. As she swept into the raucous room, as predicted, she soon felt a hand at the small of her back, Doug's scent filling her head when he bent to whisper in her ear:

"Did I tell you yet how gorgeous you look tonight?"

She glanced up to him, fairly shivering. "No, as a matter of fact."

His brows raised. "Really?"

"Honest to God."

"Damn. We'll have to fix that."

Up ahead was a group of people who no doubt were waiting for her. Luckily, they

hadn't seen her yet. Lucky because Doug was steering her down a hallway, and behind a screen hiding several stacks of chairs.

"I can't keep my hands off of you," he whispered, bending to kiss her.

And when he did, she nearly lost her mind. God, she loved the taste of him: clean like mint, a hint of some potent musk, a strong dose of lust. His hand was already kneading her ass, her body up against another as hard as iron, his length stiffening exponentially to her rapidly rising breathing. His tongue found hers and he deepened his kiss, his hand sliding up her bodice to snake inside to a nipple. When he pinched it, Gina groaned.

"You'll make a mess of me," she whispered.

He licked her ear. "Why not? You've already made one of me."

"Did not," she breathed, her hand falling against his swollen cock.

He flinched. "Look, you know as well as I do if we don't take care of this, neither of us will be able to form a coherent sentence out there."

She pulled his head down to meet hers. "So fuck me. Quick. Right here."

He blinked. "Well, I had something better in mind—"

"No." She pressed herself against him. "I want you to fuck me."

He growled, hoisting her atop a stack of chairs. "Now's not the time."

"Then when is?" She looked down; he was sliding her gown up to her waist, spreading her legs. She had known better than to wear panties under her garter belt. "Doug!"

Too late. The couldn't think about his cock when his tongue was so savage against her clit. She gnarled her fingers into his hair as he paid homage to her pussy, spreading her lips with his thumbs as he licked around her swollen clit. Her back arched when his tongue found her slit, and a second later she was off, her hips bucking against his mouth as he sucked the orgasm from her, and in those fleeting moments she knew: she had to have his cock inside her one way or another.

"Gina," he moaned, with one more electric lick that nearly launched her to the ceiling.

She slid from the chair, her pussy still throbbing as she fell to her knees. Doug flattened himself against the wall and unzipped, Gina taking his full length down her throat the moment his cock sprang free.

“Christ!” he nearly yelled, his hands on her head, and within seconds Gina’s mouth filled with the salty-sweet taste of his come – coming and coming and coming. *Jesus!* she thought, swallowing, his hot flesh pulsing against her tongue, his breath rapid and guttural, his hips slightly jerking. *I must be like his own personal time bomb.* As he was to her, she knew. As she sucked him back, swirling her tongue around his last traces, she felt herself coming again, her hips following the same rhythm as she milked the orgasm out of him. When he stilled, as she basked in the bliss that always followed, she couldn’t help but feel a bit confused. Wouldn’t she ever feel his cock really inside her?

“Come here,” he murmured, pulling her to her feet.

He had never kissed her more sweetly, her taste in his mouth, his, no doubt, in hers. He pressed her tightly against him, and she could feel the beat of his heart, but clearly, the urgency was sated. Only contentment remained.

Gina grabbed a hank of her hair. “I must look like hell.”

Doug smiled with something she couldn’t define. “I’ve never seen you more beautiful.”

She laughed. “And you certainly look sexy as hell with my lipstick all over your mouth.”

“Don’t I?” He took out a handkerchief and blotted. *Were detectives the last people in the world who still carried them?* He shifted against her. “Got a feeling the rest of it’s someplace else.”

She pushed off him. “No doubt. Oh look, there’s another bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

He zipped, straightened his jacket, slipped a mint into his mouth. After running a hand through his hair, he looked nearly perfect. Gina couldn’t help but marvel.

“I’ll be waiting,” he said, crossing his arms.

She shivered again and ducked inside.

Wasn't she in a similar place just minutes before? She straightened her bodice, seeing the marks from his lips just below the fabric line. Her nipples hardened. God, if he didn't know the meaning of discretion. She took a brush, powder and lipstick from her clutch and went to work, and within minutes, she had been restored to decency. She thought of going into a stall, but she rather liked the bit of dampness he had left in her nether region. Because even momentarily reflecting on how it got there sent it dampening even further so really, why bother? Still, she couldn't help but wonder why he didn't simply hoist her against him and fuck her. Why, in all their encounters these last couple of days, hadn't he fucked her at all? It couldn't be that he was incapable, and it clearly wasn't that he didn't desire her. She took one last look in the mirror – what was it? She walked out into the hall, scanning from left to right.

He was gone.

“Gina?”

She jumped, looking straight ahead.

“Gina! How the hell are you?” A slightly balding middle-aged man walked over, his hand extended.

“Marcus.” Gina slid her clutch under her arm and slipped her hand into that of the chief of staff of Congresswoman Antonia Perez. Even though her legislative district was next to Congressman Falco's, her D.C. office was one floor up in the Rayburn building, and it'd been a while since she ran into his aide. Especially with Congress currently out of session. “How's that bill coming?”

“Stalled, no surprise there.” He tugged at his collar; clearly, he had bought it either a decade or twenty pounds earlier. “Hey, I hear your guy would've moved up from ranking member to chair of Appropriations if he wasn't running for governor.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, shifting on one foot. “Why's he doing that anyway? Why run in-state when his star's rising so fast federal?”

“Oh come on, Marcus,” she said with a wink. “Everyone knows the quickest route

to the White House is via the State House.” She looked past him. Where was Doug?

He leaned in. “Then it’s true?”

She swept her hand in front of her. “I’m not saying anything.”

He laughed. “Same old clamped-lips Gina. You’re a freaking legend, you know that?”

“Why follow rumors, Marcus, when you can start them?” Music spilled in from the ballroom and they gravitated toward it.

“Dance?” he said, offering his arm.

“Sure,” she said, taking it, and they walked out onto the dance floor.

It was a nice, staid waltz, and Marcus was a capable enough dancer. She continued the small talk, the usual Jersey politico splice and dice, both scanning the floor for who was there, who wasn’t and who should be. Like Doug, who was still nowhere to be seen. *Dammit!* she thought, irritated. He’d picked a fine time to be elusive. Why hadn’t he done it during the day when she was at Falco’s local congressional office, elbow-deep in correspondence and constituents, instead of lounging in the corner chair, those icy eyes clamped on her legs, driving her slowly mad? Mad with wanting to pull him into the nearest closet to fuck him dry. Not a single thing could’ve happened to her within those four walls, but here? Amid hundreds of people? The waltz ended and quickly went into a jitterbug. Marcus lifted a brow asking, *Want to?* Gina shrugged and smiled a *why not?* Ten minutes later, she found herself panting on the sidelines with Marcus’s wife and a couple of press secretaries, a cold glass of champagne in her hand.

“Didn’t you come in with someone?” asked Marcus’s wife.

Gina smiled subtly. “You noticed, huh?”

“Someone like that,” one of the press secretaries said, “screams to be noticed.”

“I’ll second that,” said the other. “Who is he?”

“An old friend,” Gina said, hardly a lie.

“Well, if he’s not with benefits, girl,” said the first press secretary, “you need to get your head seriously examined.”

Gina took a sip of champagne. "I'll take that under advisement."

"Gina! Sweetheart!"

She turned. *Oh God, no.* "Hello, Lee."

He adjusted his Clark Kent glasses and grabbed her hand, sliding his own over it.

"You look magnificent, as usual. How are you, darling?"

"Just great, Lee." She took another sip, scanning the room. Where the hell was Doug? "You?"

When he smiled that grin of his – his most lethally seductive attribute – Gina was almost blinded by the sparkle. "Deadly fabulous, Gina darling." He took a step closer. "Especially now that you're here."

There was a time when just a glance from Lee Roland would've sent Gina into a swoon. Especially back when she was coming off of six months of mourning after the heartbreak that was Douglas Welland, and this state senator, pharmaceutical heir and DNC heavyweight decided to pay her some undivided attention. But as money-smart and politically savvy as he was, he was also a player through and through, and she hardly needed to walk in on him doing her aide atop her own desk to know she shouldn't have gotten involved with him in the first place. Not that he took their breakup lightly. He pursued her with all the relentlessness of a tiger shark, but Gina never gave in. Far be it from her to make the same mistake twice.

"Dance with me," he said, coming even closer.

She glanced to the stage. "I believe the band's on break."

He slipped the flute from her hand, took a sip, handed it back. "There's a deejay spinning."

She handed the flute back to him. "Pass."

"You can't avoid me forever," he whispered, leaning in.

"I can try." She stepped back, and immediately into something very solid behind her.

"Gina, why don't you introduce me to your friend?"

Gina turned to see Doug's eyes lasering into Lee's. *Thank God.* "Doug, this is State Senator Lee Roland."

"Charmed, I'm sure," Lee opined, sliding his hands in his pockets. "Gina, I'll be talking with you soon. Now, if you'll excuse me." He slunk off.

Gina closed her eyes, exhaling. "Criminy." She turned to Doug. "Where did you go?"

"Nowhere in particular."

"But you left me alone!"

"You're in a roomful of people."

"Anyone of whom could've been the nut out to get me."

His eyes darkened. "Not while I'm here."

"Oh really?" She poked her hair, smoothed her skirt, clutched her bag. "You sure of that?"

He took her arm. "I'd stake my life on it. Come on."

"Where're we going?" she said as he led her off the dance floor.

"To that man, who's obviously waving us over."

"Who?" She peered to where they were heading. "Oh jeez, Jack's here. Dammit, I should've been watching for him."

"Ever the good admin, eh? Or is it more than that?"

She smiled. "Oh my, are you jealous, Doug?"

His hand fell possessively to the small of her back. "When I am, doll, you won't have to ask." A moment later, she sailed away from him.

"Jack!" she said, arms wide. "When did you get here!"

* * * *

The Ladies' Choice, is what they called Jack Falco. Doug eyed the man, sizing him up as Gina absorbed his full attention. *Ladies' choice, my ass*, he thought. He'd liked to snap him in two.

"Jack Falco? Sure, I voted for him. Didn't you?" Doug recalled Dr. Lateesha

gushing as she drained every last ounce of blood from him. “What’s not to like?” The proper doctor had seemed to go a little woozy picturing him. “Forty-two, dark hair with that sexy graying at the temples, eyes like tarnished copper pennies.” She sighed, which nearly made Doug cringe. “Oh yeah, the man’s smokin’ for sure.” She’d snapped on another blood collection tube and smiled wickedly. “If I were you, Dougie, I’d keep my woman on one tight leash because if it were me, well...” She winked. “There’s just no *telling*.”

Right. Doug thought, *I’d like to see him try.* But then again, he may already have had the chance. Doug tightened the space between he and Gina as she turned to take his hand.

“Jack,” she said, pulling Doug to her side, “I’d like you to meet my...*friend*, Lt. Douglas Welland of the Camden Police.”

The spin with which she marked their association was hardly lost on Doug. He extended his hand. “Congressman.”

As was the glance Jack Falco shot Gina before he grasped Doug’s hand. “Lt. Welland, I’ve heard a lot about you,” he said, smiling warmly. He leaned in, still holding on, and added *sotto voce*, “Thank you for being here – sincerely.”

Doug sniffed. Oh, he was good. Eyes bleeding sincerity, mouth angled with just the correct level of concern, a handshake capable of not only telegraphing his alpha-dog status but also a fair amount of warning. Doug locked onto his gaze, the meaning clear: *You hurt her again and you’ll answer to me.*

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else, Congressman,” he said, giving the man’s hand an equally portentous squeeze.

Jack smiled again, letting go. “We have some things to talk about then. Do you think you could meet me in my office tomorrow morning at, say, ten o’clock?”

Doug noticed another man lingering at a discreet distance: Falco’s own bodyguard, no doubt, undercover state police like Halchak had said. Not that it mattered. It could’ve been FBI for all Doug cared. His only concern for the foreseeable future was the woman

standing inches away, watching them both intently. “I’ll be there.”

“We both will,” said Gina.

“Obviously.” Jack’s mouth quirked at his aide-de-camp. “Joined at the hip these days, aren’t you?”

Gina dipped her head with a snort, a blush rising up her neck. Doug flexed his hand. Christ, he’d love to flatten him.

“Join me at my table?” Jack said, not really a request as he took Gina’s arm.

Doug had no choice but to follow. And watch. And steam. Not that he shouldn’t have been surprised at the sight of such an intimate tête-à-tête between the two, leaning into each other, laughing at a some insider observation, whispering conspiratorially. Still, it chafed, seeing her so close to another man, and he wanted to smack himself for being so juvenile. This woman had a long, long history without him, before and after their liaison, and he had no right to hinge her loyalty on a little more than two months together. And maybe that was the part that hurt the most, if he had to get down to it: That even though he once again had license to touch and kiss and make love to every inch of her body, he couldn’t seem to breach the very core that was Gina Bardone. All at once she laughed, tossing back her head, Jack grinning alongside her. Doug wanted to rip the planking from the walls.

As they approached the table a man stood, tall like Jack and Doug himself, yet lankier, as athletic as a runner. Next to him sat a woman, mid-height from what he could tell and very blond, but a natural one he suspected, all pert and smiles and yet a bit on edge, like she had just come off the end of an argument.

“Ted,” said Jack. “Glad to see you could make it.”

He reached across the table to grasp Jack’s hand. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Congressman.” He glanced to Gina. “Ms. Bardone.”

She stared at the man with obvious surprise. “Mr. Parks,” she said, the ice in her voice palpable.

He held her gaze for a moment before glancing to the woman on his left. “And

this is my wife, Leslie.”

Was Doug the only one who noticed the shock on Gina’s face when she looked to his wife? A little warning bell went off in his head.

But before Gina could utter a word, Jack had already come around to Leslie’s side. “Ah, the lovely Leslie. Your husband’s told me so much about you.” He grasped her hand. “Jack Falco.”

“He has?” She arched a dubious brow at her husband before looking back to Jack. “Don’t believe a word of it.”

“I don’t have to. I’m already forming my own opinion,” he said, his hand closing over hers. “But I’ll also consider anything you’d like to add.”

“Really? Oh my, now that’d be refreshing.”

“Wouldn’t it?” He smiled brilliantly before letting her go. “Have you met my chief of staff, Gina Bardone?”

“I have now,” Leslie said, nodding to Gina. “Hi, there.”

“Leslie,” Gina said, swallowing hard.

Jack looked from Gina to Ted. “I take it you already know Ted,” said the Congressman.

Gina crossed her arms in front of her. “Yes, we’ve—”

“We’re old friends,” finished Ted. “Way, way, back.”

Doug flexed his hand again. *What the hell was going on here?*

Jack turned to Doug. “Doug, Ted Parks and his wife, Leslie.” He looked to Gina. “Ted has just agreed to be my county campaign manager.”

Doug barely had a chance to nod before Gina interjected with, “Really?” She smiled tightly at her boss. “How wonderful.”

Jack continued, turning to Doug. “He’s got quite the resume. District attorney, former mayor of Riverboro, County Party chairman, to name a few.”

“Sounds a perfect candidate for your seat, Congressman,” said Doug.

Ted laughed. “Oh, now where did you hear that? First I’d have to talk Leslie into

a change of venue.”

“Oh, don’t blame it on me,” Leslie said dryly. “I think a change of venue is *exactly* what we need.”

Doug had the impression if he and his wife were both sitting down, Ted would be nursing a very sore ankle. He detested him on sight.

As a matter of fact, Doug was doing a fair amount of detesting this evening. Everywhere he looked there appeared a new source of irritation, every man who crossed Gina’s path seemingly harboring a hidden past. Were they all former lovers? Or were they all just lying in wait? He glanced to Ted Parks; there was definitely something between him and Gina. And Lee Roland. The man had Gina’s fingerprints all over him, as plain as tattoos.

And Jack. *Jack*. Doug narrowed his gaze to him. There he was, fawning all over Gina again, both huddled over her BlackBerry as she tapped out some directive he could very well just give her tomorrow. And now even with him – with Doug – sitting so near to her, as he stared at her creamy back, her silky hair, her breasts seemed to be heaving way, way too much every time Jack uttered what vaguely resembled something witty. He jabbed his fork into his lobster tail, the shell shattering. *Good practice*, he figured.

This is what he got for leaving her alone earlier in the evening. When he was still coming down from their last encounter, when he needed a bit of walking to calm his pounding heart, when being so close to her again took his breath away. It almost happened, he’d almost allowed it, and he didn’t know how much longer he could stop himself. It wasn’t natural, and he knew it. Even now, with her just across and a couple hundred voices swirling around him, he wanted her so badly it was all he could do to keep from dragging her out the door and doing her right in the parking lot. And when Ted came over to talk to her, when the wail of the band behind them made him lean down and whisper in her ear, Doug felt his anger flare so dangerously, no way could any sane judge expect him to be responsible for what he came perilously close to doing. He gripped the edge of the table.

Gina's eyes shot to Doug's, and she glanced to the clock on the wall. "Oh my God, look at the time. Jack, would you mind if we called it a night?"

Jack looked to the clock as well. "Jeez, it is getting kind of late." He stood, rising to meet Gina and Doug. "Thanks so much for coming, Doug," he said, reaching to shake his hand. "I'll see you in the A.M., right?"

"Ten," Gina affirmed.

Ted stood as well. "Don't forget to stop by County headquarters. With the rally in Riverboro Sunday, there are some things the two of us need to do."

Gina slanted him a glance. "I'll try to make it Saturday, but I really think the district office has everything under control."

"Yes, but there's still a few—"

"She said she'd try," Doug said, his voice lethal. He came around the table, taking Gina's arm as he nodded to Jack. "Congressman."

"Lt. Welland. See you tomorrow."

And without another word, he nearly dragged her out the door.

They were in the Holly House drive before Gina managed to coax a reaction from him. "Fine display of Neanderthal etiquette tonight, Doug."

He glared at her, opening the door as they came to a stop. He tipped the driver, not even sure if he had to, latching onto Gina's arm to haul her inside.

"Key," he said, and she fumbled with her purse to retrieve it, mumbling something he hadn't the patience to decipher. He swiped the keycard through the reader. Once they were inside, he finally let go of her and she winced, rubbing the spot where his handprint still remained.

"Bastard," she hissed. "You hurt me. As a matter of fact, you acted like a bloody idiot all night. Did you utter just one word, one goddamned phrase that didn't have a threat attached to it? How are you ever going to look Jack in the eye tomorrow?" She tossed her purse to the sofa and turned toward the bedroom. "Enough with this bullshit animal display. You want to act all caveman?" She flung her arm toward the fireplace.

“You can begin by sleeping by the fire. Try not to burn yourself. I’m going to bed.”

Before she could take another step, he lunged at her, swinging her with such force she crashed into his chest with a thud. “If I’m sleeping out here, you’ll be under me,” he growled. Seizing her mouth with his own, he ripped her gown to the navel.

Chapter Six

HOLLY HOUSE INN, RIVERBORO, NJ

THURSDAY 29 OCTOBER

Gina would've gasped, had Doug left her the breath to do it. She collapsed in his arms, her breasts bared against the starched fabric of his tuxedo, her ruined gown sloughing away to leave her upper torso naked and writhing in his grasp.

"Let go, you son of a bitch!" she hissed against his mouth. His answer was a bite to the corner of her lip. She responded by nipping his tongue. Which only made him stab it deeper inside her mouth. "You animal!" she choked out, her fists pummeling his chest.

He whirled her around, pressing her against the wall, nearly lifting her off her feet when he grabbed her by the waist and ground himself into her. She shivered, arching her neck as he bit his way across it, breathing so heavily she began to feel lightheaded. And angrier than she'd ever been in her life.

"What do you think you're doing!" she cried, still pummeling him. She kicked his knee and he grunted, twisting her around to the back of a chair, knocking over a lamp which he sent sailing into a bookcase. His eyes electrified, he shoved her gown over her knees.

Gina simply laughed. "Oh, here we go again! You're gonna eat me and I'm gonna suck you dry." She pressed the toe of her pump to his chest, pushing him back. "Well, that's not working for me anymore, sweetie. I need someone who'll work a whole lot harder than that. I need a *real* man who knows how to fuck me."

His pupils flared and instantly Gina knew she went too far. She swung herself over the chair and leapt to the floor, grabbing the bodice of her ruined gown as she scrambled for the sanctuary of the bedroom and its locked door. Precisely one breath and three feet later, she knew just how foolish that idea was. Doug's arm locked around her, tumbling them to the floor.

“Real man, huh?” he growled, propped over her, Gina under him as he spread her legs with his. Within seconds he had her gown around her waist and his fly opened, his cock springing forth a massive erection. Her breath hitched and she immediately went wet, her heart pounding out her chest when he arched up, and drove himself into her.

She yelped, her legs going limp. Doug reached under her thigh and looped it over his arm, angling her for better depth as he pumped his hips against her. “I’m the only man you’ll ever need,” he said, savaging her pussy with such indescribable efficiency she could already feel the orgasm working its way from her toes. He bent down to nip a corner of her breast, leaving a mark. “Say it.”

“Jesus...” was all she could manage as her hips began to quiver.

“*Say it,*” he insisted, spreading his palm over her lower belly, his thumb teasing the edge of her clit.

She looked up to a face no longer filled with jealousy or anger, but frantic longing. She raised her hand to his cheek. “You’re the only man,” she said, and he grasped her fingers, kissing, devouring them. She let herself go, her climax rising with every thrust until she nearly imploded, stiffening as its tendrils spread through her like spilled mercury. He bent into her again, his mouth closing around a nipple.

“Doug, oh Doug,” she murmured, “I’ve waited so long for this. Waited so long for you.” He sucked her hard, then dragging his mouth to hers, kissed her so tenderly her eyes stung with tears. “God, how I’ve missed you.”

She could feel his lashes against her cheek as he kissed his way across her face. “Gina,” he murmured, almost in thanks, and she raised her hips to him, feeling such a surge of desire, the thought of any other man coming near her ever again was beyond comprehension.

“Doug,” she whispered, her hands smoothing the soft skin of his ass, “no man has ever made me feel like you do. Has ever made me feel like I do now.” She nipped his ear and his breathing rose, his hips thrusting with new intensity as she felt his orgasm rising, knowing another of hers would soon follow. “Oh Doug, oh sweetie...oh...” Who

had ever fucked her like this? She glanced down to see his slick cock gliding in and out of her pussy, and it nearly drove her insane. She wanted all of him, every inch, every last ounce.

“Come in me, Doug. I want you to come in me, *please*.”

Immediately he stilled, looking at her in horror. Then with a shuddering gasp, he yanked himself from her and spilled into her gown. When he was through, he slumped against her.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, holding her.

Gina sighed. Who was she kidding? In no way could things be that simple. She shifted beneath him, running her fingers into his hair. “God, we have a lot to talk about.”

He lifted himself from her and smiled painfully. “An understatement, I’m sure.” Then he stood and reaching down, pulled her to her feet. When she faced him, he thumbed what used to be the bodice of her gown. “I think I owe you a dress.”

She sniffed, pushing it off her. “Get yourself out of that tux and we’ll call it even.”

“Deal,” he said, already stripping. When they both were naked, he carried her into the bedroom.

They didn’t talk, just pulled back the covers of the big bed and crawled under them, Doug hanging his holster over the post, setting his pistol to the night table. When he lay on his back, throwing one arm over his head, Gina turned on her side and sprawled next to him, kissing his chest before she lay her head against it. She could hear the soft thump of his heart, heard it kick up a notch when she laced her leg into his.

“I haven’t fucked anyone since you,” he said, sliding the pins from her hair.

That startled her. She couldn’t quite believe it. The Doug she knew needed sex like a plant needed water. “You haven’t had sex since we’ve been together?”

He snorted. “I wouldn’t exactly say that. As the last couple days have proved, there’s a whole lot you can do without fucking.”

“Yeah, but...” She didn’t know whether to feel outraged or flattered. “Well, I can’t say the same thing.”

“Not something I want to think about,” he said flatly, pulling her just a bit closer. “I want you to know the other day I had about a million blood tests done, for just about every disease known to man.”

She sat up. “Oh my God, why? Are you sick?”

“No. Not that I know of, I mean. I got them done for you.”

She traced his nipple with her finger, feeling contentious. “So you’ve been a pretty bad boy.” Not that she wanted him to answer.

“Yes,” he said. “In ways that’d make your skin crawl.”

She drew back slightly. “Well, thanks for being so honest. I guess that makes being with me kind of boring.”

He dragged her across his chest until her lips met his. “You’re the most beautiful, most exciting woman I’ve even known. All you have to do is look at me and I want to fall apart. Christ, Gina.” He kissed her deeply. “Can’t you see that?”

“All I can see” – she nuzzled his neck – “is how badly I fucked with your head. I never wanted to, Doug. You need to believe me.”

He slipped his arm around her. “Believe me, I’m trying to.”

“But you still don’t trust me.”

He sighed, looking away. “Gina...”

“No, don’t answer that. Not until you’re sure. I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

She slipped from his arms, sliding down his chest until her head rested on his belly. She ran her hand over his silky skin, feeling the taut muscles flex as her fingers glided across. *God, he has no idea how beautiful he is*, she thought, burying her nose in the soft hair just below his navel, kissing the indentation near his hip. Against his thigh lay his still-flaccid cock, remarkable even in rest. The length of it still astounded her. Her fingers crept forward and when she touched it, it flinched as if it had been shocked. Gina smiled as it quickly went turgid. She pushed up, propping herself between his slightly

spread legs, the thatch of her pussy resting against his stiffening cock.

“How funny is it,” She rubbed against him, watching his eyes. “That with all the trouble in the world, the wars, the injustice, and even with someone out there threatening me, and you with your problems and I with mine, we...” She leaned forward, brushing her lips against his. “Here we are, just the two of us in this little bed, and right now there’s nothing in the world more important than this. Or is there?” Her mouth crooked, hoping that in his world, there wasn’t.

He clenched his eyes tightly for a moment before his hand went around the back of her head and he pulled her to him, kissing her slowly and deeply. “No, there isn’t. There never is with you.” He moved against her, his now fully-erect shaft pressing against her belly. “I want to fuck you, doll,” he breathed against her mouth. “I want to be inside you.” He slid his hand down her hip. “In my jacket, in the inside pocket, there’s some condoms—”

“No,” she said, kissing him, catching his tongue with hers. “I want to feel you, feel all of you. I want your come inside me, filling me up.”

He groaned, pressing against her. “No.” He nudged her away from him, his passion-filled eyes giving way to clearing. “Gina, don’t.”

“Doug, I’m okay, really I am. I’ve always used a condom, I’m on the pill and you’re—” She pushed back, kissing her way down the length of his body until she straddled his cock, her pussy so wet she could slide right down him. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted,” she breathed, reaching behind her to wrap her fingers around him, grazing his satiny tip with her slick moisture, her fingers stroking his balls. She tossed her head, her long hair spilling around her. “You’re the only man I’ll ever—”

He grabbed her hips, groaning as he drove himself into her. “God *damn*, Gina,” he rasped as his hips pumped her, “you’re going to kill me yet, aren’t you?”

They didn’t talk after that. She just sat back and let him fuck her, lifting her up with each thrust. She leaned forward and he took a nipple in his mouth, his hands sliding up and down her breasts, biting kisses across her until he left a trail of marks. Gina

moaned, letting her hair fall around him as she took his lower lip between her teeth and kissed him, tasting brandy and urgency. She slid her hands to the bed and stretched atop him, his cock still deep within her as he wrapped his arms around her.

“Come on up,” he said, pulling himself from her. He lifted her easily and settled her over his mouth. Gina braced her hands not only against the wall, but also for his gorgeous assault. “Oh...my...God...” she moaned as his tongue explored every inch of her pussy, his hand kneading her ass. Within seconds, she was quivering against his lips. With her climax still pulsing, he lifted her from him and rolled her to the mattress, Gina crying out when he sank his cock into her.

What bliss, she thought, her legs spread wide and Doug between them, his hand caressing her cheek. How often had she thought about this, how bright had her memory remained all those long, lonely nights? She looked at him, his broad chest looming above her, his mouth crooked in determination, those incredible eyes hooded and glazed with desire. As no doubt were hers, too, and she stretched, her breasts arching into him. At that his eyes flared and he stopped abruptly, pulling out and lifting her from the bed.

“Where we going?” she said from within his arms. But he just kissed her, more passionately than he had before. Gina melted into him, her fingers ruffling his hair as he took them into the bathroom. He was still kissing her when he reached into the shower and turned it on. When the water was just right, he stepped into the tub and set her to her feet.

“Here’s your answer,” he said, kissing her neck as he reached for the bar of soap. Her only comment was a series of small sighs as spread lather around her breasts, her belly and her pussy, turning her around to run the bar between the cleft of her ass. She was fairly foaming when he set the soap down and she braced against the tile, knowing only too well what was coming. The first time they had tried it, it was her idea, wanting to get adventurous and maybe a tad kinky. The subsequent times had always been at her invitation. The fact that he was initiating it now was more than a little exciting, and telling.

Doug crouched behind her, kissing the soft mounds of flesh, his lips lingering to leave a mark or two. Gina's clit throbbed as he nipped and kissed her, her ass slightly swaying as she felt a trail of something cold and very slippery slide down between her cheeks. As the water rained over them she squirmed in anticipation as he rose to his feet, and grasping her hips, crouched slightly before he slid his cock into her pussy.

"Christ, Gina," he rasped, "how I missed fucking you." And then he did, pumping her with rising urgency, faster and faster as his balls lightly peppered her clit, pushing her once again into orgasm and she moaned, shaking against him. Suddenly he pulled out and the tip of his cock slid to her anus, gently sinking in until he was buried as far as she could take him. Gina froze, her back arched. Doug's finger found her clit and slowly stroked it, her insides burgeoning with such a depth of erotic fullness, she thought she might collapse. But she couldn't, not with Doug so intimately impaling her and moving deliciously in and out, his fingers tightening around her hips. And when his breathing kicked up, when he pushed even harder into her and a low growl worked its way up his throat, she knew he was coming, feeling him pulsing, spilling deeply inside her. The thought of his juices flooding her sent her over the edge, as well as into an equal depth of rumination.

He missed fucking me, yet...

"Holy...fuck," he choked out, his cock slowly withdrawing. He grabbed the soap, washing off before he wrapped his arms around her, nuzzling her neck from behind. "Was that okay? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

She leaned back against his shoulder. "Of course not," she said, and he kissed her, sliding the soap between her cheeks. As he rubbed she flinched slightly, finding she was a little sore, more from being severely out of practice than anything else. But Doug noticed. He fell to his haunches behind her.

"I did hurt you," he said, spreading her slightly to examine her more closely. He kissed her cheeks, first one then the other, before he turned her around and pressed his mouth to her belly. "Damn," he said, "I'm sorry."

She smiled, gloriously unabashed. With what other man could she be so intimately acquainted? Was there a better, more secure feeling in the world than this? She squirted a dollop of shampoo into her hand, then rubbed it into his hair, scrunching her fingers through it. “It’s that big cock of yours. A regular menace. Maybe if you kept it in my pussy where it belongs, we wouldn’t have a problem.”

He looked up at her, one brow arched.

“I’m joking, of course,” she said, standing back a bit so the water could rinse his hair. “I’ll take your cock any way I can get it. Even if it’s only...” *Damn*. She stepped back into the water, squirting more shampoo into her hand. “Never mind.”

He leaned his head into the spray, furiously scratching the lather from his head before he rose. “What?”

She scrubbed the foam from her eyes and leveled her gaze. “Why won’t you come in me?”

He laughed, incredulous. “What are you talking about? I just did.”

“Right store, wrong aisle, sweetie,” she said, standing into the spray. “I think you know what I mean.”

Doug stiffened. “No. Why don’t you clarify it for me.”

“You just told me you haven’t fucked anyone since you were with me. Excuse the observation, but I find that a bit aberrant to your usual behavior. The Doug I used to know ranked fucking right up there with drawing breath.”

He flung the shower curtain back. “Yeah, well, that Doug’s changed a bit since you last knew him.”

“My point exactly,” she said, shutting down the water. “And his newest incarnation is a bit screwed in the head.”

He snatched a towel from the bar. “Oh, you think?”

“And it’s my fault. Don’t you think I know it?” She sighed heavily, stepping from the tub. “Listen, you’re gonna have to talk to me sooner or later, and the sooner you do it, the sooner we can get back to normal again – whatever the hell that was.

Come on, baby, talk to me.” She brushed her hand down his chest. “Please.”

He pulled her into his arms, Gina snuggling against his chest as he wrapped a big towel around them. She closed her eyes, breathing him in. Never in her life had she felt so secure, so comforted by anyone than in that spare moment. Which obviously was a bit premature as he hadn’t told her anything, though all his actions seemed portentous. He sighed, tucking her head against his shoulder, his skin warm and damp, pulling her long hair from beneath the towel.

“I almost died after you left,” he said, smoothing the damp strands.

“But the doctors told me you were fine. They said your operation had gone better than expected and you were going to make a complete recovery.”

“They were right.”

“Then what happened?”

He leaned back against the sink, Gina moving between his legs as he rubbed the towel against her back. “I think I heard a doctor refer to it as ‘failure to thrive.’”

“What’s that mean?”

“I think it’s what they say when they can’t determine why someone isn’t getting better. When there isn’t anything physical causing them to deteriorate.” He dried her front before Gina slipped the towel from him.

“When only the patient knows what’s wrong.” She dried his chest then leaned into him. “What happened to you, Doug?”

All the heartbreak in the world fell in his eyes. “You did.”

“Dear God,” she whispered, her vision blurring.

Gina moved away, latching onto the towel bar. “I should’ve stayed, no matter what. I should’ve fought and kicked and screamed, but I should’ve never left you.”

“Wouldn’t have mattered. I wouldn’t have listened. If you didn’t leave, then I would’ve. As it turned out, I did in a way. You know it was three weeks before I found out you lost the baby?”

“I don’t know why. I called Roark the day after it happened because you wouldn’t

take my calls.”

“I know. He told me. When he finally found me.”

She couldn’t look at him, but she had to ask. “Where were you?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Yeah, I do. Tell me.”

He looked to her, his eyes dispassionate. “With Sookie.”

She couldn’t speak for a moment. “You’re joking.”

He laughed harshly. “Christ, I wish I were.”

Four years earlier, Sookie Deauville had used her one phone call from jail to wake Gina in the middle of the night, promising a retainer bordering on the ridiculous. As the last hope of lost causes, Gina didn’t hesitate to take the case. Sookie ran an escort service whose clientele tended to lean toward the sexual preferences of the Marquis de Sade, Sookie’s own specialties being minor maimings and blood sports. These were often carried out in the dungeon of her Main Line mansion, and often with the cream of society and the electorate as clients. Defending Sookie after a raid on her house, Gina won the case by successfully arguing that what went on in her mansion, since it was her own home, was not a matter for the courts, as consenting adults could do whatever they pleased in private, no matter how perverted.

Gina was only too aware how Sookie had polished perversion to a blinding gloss. She pulled her robe from the back of the door, slipping into it. “Jesus, Doug.”

“If it’s any consolation, I hardly remember it. Sookie stocks her bar well. But ever since then – since us, I haven’t been able to...” He clenched his eyes, scrubbing his hand over his face. “Christ, Gina, I can’t help thinking of that baby and how I never want to get close to that happening again.”

Gina leaned against the wall, feeling slightly sick. “God, how you must hate me.”

“I won’t deny that I did once, but not anymore. Still, you got to give me some time.” He came up to her, lifting her chin. “Seeing you again’s been a shock, but the

alternative is a whole lot worse. I don't want to go through that again."

She gripped his shoulders. "Neither do I."

"Then we're just going to have to work at it." He slipped his arm around her waist. "Come on, doll. Let's get back into bed where we belong."

After they had climbed in, Gina lay her head on Doug's chest. "Look," she said, her hand sliding down to his knee. "You're getting a bruise here."

"Where you kicked me."

"Damn, did I do that?" She kissed it. "Crime of passion. It couldn't be helped."

He touched two spots on his pecs. "Like these?"

She looked to his neck.. "Or that?" dabbing the spot. "Oh please, sweetie, you have nothing on me."

She threw back the sheet and stretched out, Doug counting two bites on her neck, three on each breast and two on her left inner thigh. "You're a freakin' vampire," she said.

"You're forgetting these," he said, rolling her over on her belly. He pressed a kiss to each cheek. "One apiece."

She pushed up, craning her neck to see. "Huh, look at that."

"Such a beautiful ass," he murmured, kissing it again. "Shame all our bruises couldn't be like these." He stuffed a pillow under her belly and spread her legs, kissing and licking his way to her clit. Gina mewled softly, savoring each stroke of his tongue, her orgasm rising slowly and sweetly, an easy roll following so much frantic rocking. Soon after she rose up on her knees, readying for Doug to slip in from behind. It was from that angle she noticed her BlackBerry, and the message that was waiting.

"Doug, sweetie, hold on a second."

He kissed the small of her back, his hand on her breast. "*Now* you're checking your phone? Christ, talk about perfect timing."

She sat down, crossing her legs. "I'm sorry, but it's a text from Jack."

"Oh right. *Jack*." He slumped against the pillows, raking back his hair. "You think

he's getting laid now? Why don't we give *him* a good dose of *coitus interruptus*?"

Check your e-mail, the text said. Gina did, then sucked in a breath.

"Jesus, Doug!" she cried, dropping the phone in his lap. "Look at this."

You looked beautiful tonight, but your Big Stud's a waste of time.

You're still as good as dead.

"Motherfucker," Doug said. "I'll fucking kill him."

Chapter Seven

DISTRICT OFFICE U.S. REPRESENTATIVE JOHN C. FALCO – RIVERBORO

FRIDAY 30 OCTOBER

“I should have a list of everyone at the banquet this afternoon,” said Jack.

Doug paced, eyeing the BlackBerry in his hand. *You had better start looking for a new aide. This one’s shot.* He looked to Jack. “When did you get this?”

“My phone was turned off, but it wasn’t there when I checked it around nine thirty,” said Jack, pouring coffee from a pot atop his desk. “The time stamp says 11:55, about a half-hour after yours.”

“And almost an hour after we left,” said Gina, her arm resting atop the back of the sofa.

“I didn’t look at it again until I got in my car, around fifteen minutes after you did,” he added. “Checked it before I went to bed, and there it was. I texted you right after I got it.”

“Must have been while I was in the shower,” Gina mused aloud, her lips pursed.

Doug cleared his throat, handing the phone back to the congressman. “Did you get a trace yet?”

“Again, from a public place.” Jack passed Gina a mug of coffee before he regained his big leather chair. “It’s from a guest computer at the Radisson in Philadelphia. They have three conventions going on at once. Could have been anyone.”

“Except it isn’t,” said Gina, the coffee untouched in her hands. “It’s the same Yahoo account, and the person was at the party last night.” She turned to Doug. “He’s gaining on me.”

Doug burned her a look. “Yeah? Well, he’s got to get through me first.”

He meant it. The very thought of anyone coming near Gina sent him into a blind rage. He clenched his fist. But he had to remain calm, focused. His investigative training

and years of practical knowledge had taught him only clear and analytical thinking cracked the case. But when had he ever been this intimately involved? Maybe it hadn't been wise to agree to protect Gina. But how could he have had it any other way? Because he knew damn well if even if he hadn't agreed, he'd find the weasel bastard and strangle his fucking neck.

Too late for that, he thought, taking a deep breath. He forced himself to concentrate, looking to Jack. "Time to turn this over to the squad."

"No cops!" Gina said, horrified. "Could you imagine what that'd do to Jack's campaign? Might as well put a target on his back."

"Better than one being on yours." He turned a cool gaze to Jack. "Right, Congressman?"

"You may not believe me, but I've told her that from the start." He looked to Gina. "But ever the good trouper, she refused to consider it. I don't think we have a choice now."

"Jack, you know that's political suicide." Gina stood up, looking at Doug. "Besides, we don't have to. There's already someone on the case. *You*."

Doug leaned back against the wall, amazed. She really was the best out there. Because he was, by all definition, a cop on suspension, yet by corralling him into protecting her with Captain Halchak's blessing, she had the full force of the Camden Police behind her, with none of the public record. It was a stroke of pure genius.

And all she had to do was fuck him.

"Yeah, I'm all over it, aren't I?" Doug said dryly. "How convenient is that?"

Apparently Gina got his meaning right away; her eyes narrowed. "That's not what I meant."

He turned to Jack. "Who's been running the forensics on the e-mails?"

Jack glanced to Gina. "Debbie." Then to the tablet on his desk. "Here it is – Lamberton—"

"A friend of mine," Gina interjected. "She's with the CCU. Helped me out in the

old days.”

The Cyber Crimes Unit of the State Police. Doug reached for his coffee, now cold on Jack’s desk. She really did have all the bases covered. “And she’s still a pal now. How convenient.” He took a sip and set it back. “Come on, Gina, we’ve got work to do.”

“Where we going?”

“Wherever good ol’ Debbie is now.” Doug nodded to Jack. “We’ll keep you posted.”

Gina gripped his arm once they were out in the hall. “You want to tell me the meaning of all that back there?”

He slipped from her grasp. “No meaning beside the obvious, doll. Just doing the job I was hired to do.”

“Doug – where’s that coming from?”

He laughed slightly, holding the door opened as she walked outside. “You’re fucking incredible, you know that?”

She stopped halfway to the car. “You mind explaining yourself?”

“Everything for the job. Never deviate from the plan.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You,” he said, leaning in. “You’re in it twenty-four seven, aren’t you? Always on, always ready. Every fucking thing you do. Everything for the job.” He looked around. “Just like now. Start a scene on the sidewalk, because then there’ll be no scene. Doug would never do that. Full transparency.”

“You *are* insane.”

He pulled a flask from his pocket. “You got it, doll.”

Her eyes flared. “Put that away!”

He turned, taking a swig. “Forget it. With me, everything’s out in the open.” And then another.

Gina stared at his retreating back, before she shook her head tightly and followed. She opened the car door and slid inside. “You think I’m using you, don’t you?”

“Sweetheart, that’s impossible,” he said, starting the car. “You’re too good a piece of ass.”

“You bastard,” she breathed, turning crimson.

“Shut up,” he said, the tires squealing as he backed into the street.

* * * *

NEW JERSEY STATE POLICE CYBER CRIMES UNIT

REGIONAL OFFICE – MOORESTOWN

Debbie Lamberton, medium height and muscular as a gymnast, clicked on the PowerPoint slide and walked up to the whiteboard. “Let me show you a few things I’ve figured out,” she said, jabbing a pencil into the tight knot of blond hair at the nape of her neck.

Doug leaned forward in his chair. He hadn’t said a word to Gina since they left Jack’s office, and outside of which street to turn down, neither had she. He glanced over to her, those long legs crossed at the knee as she perched on the edge of her chair. Maybe it was a good thing, all things considered. The thoughts racing through his brain were none too charitable.

He looked to Debbie. “You figure things from just what they’ve written?”

“Well, that, sure,” she answered, picking up a laser pointer. “But more in the way they’ve written it.” She waved her hand dismissively. “Let me explain.

“E-mail presents a whole new spectrum of identification, because it’s not like handwriting where you can analyze the style, or a typewriter, where you can trace the machine. But there are subtle clues to character you can pick up, as telling as the whorls and curves of handwriting. Take this first e-mail Jack received.”

There’s still a Death Penalty in NJ for SOME people.

“Notice the words ‘death penalty?’”

“They’re capitalized,” said Gina.

“Right. Now bear that in mind when you’re considering these.” Debbie sent more images to the whiteboard.

Sometimes People get in the way.

Sometimes the Bullet misses the target and people get hurt.

Sometimes the Worst things happen even with your friends all around you.

“We look for several things, and one of them is consistency. Seems like this perp likes to capitalize what he wants to emphasize, what he figures is the most important thing in the sentence – death penalty, people, bullet, worst.”

“The point he’s trying to get across,” said Doug.

“Exactly. And he does it in every e-mail. He also likes to stick to a theme, as in the repetition of the word, ‘sometimes’ – a two-syllable word that also gives us a little hint about the writer’s origins.”

She circled the word each time it appeared. “Even in these days of global communication, we still have regional speech patterns, even in a state as small as New Jersey. Somewhere above Trenton, smack in the middle of the state, there’s an invisible line which separates North Jersey from South Jersey, the regional accents influenced by New York or Philadelphia. See this?” She circled the *s* on each of the *sometimes*. “Adding an *s* to words like *sometimes* and *besides* and *towards* is typical South Jersey. Any other place, those words are singular.”

Gina leaned closer. “Huh. I never noticed that.”

Debbie smiled. “That’s because you’re from South Jersey.”

“Riverboro, born and raised.”

“So you’re also partial to getting *some* ice cream, or *some* exercise or *some* sleep.”

Gina yawned. “Especially *some* sleep.”

Doug cleared his throat.

Gina tossed him a glare before turning back to Debbie. “So the guy’s from South Jersey. What else can you tell?”

“Well, look at this.” Debbie clicked to another slide.

Such a shame to break those lovely, long legs; slit that pretty little throat;

put a bullet into that filthy brain.

When Gina visibly shivered, Doug suppressed the urge to pull her into his arms. “The first time he gets personal,” he said.

Debbie looked to Gina, her mouth crooking sympathetically. “Yes. But it also confirms for me he’s most likely an educated man, or certainly someone who takes writing seriously.”

“Scumbag with the heart of a poet?” said Doug. “How do you figure that?”

“Look at this here.” She circled the laser pointer around the semicolon after *legs*. “He knows that items in a series are separated by semicolons when there’s internal punctuation.” She pointed to the comma after *lovely*.

“Excuse me?” said Gina.

“In other words,” Doug said, “he knows his way around English grammar and punctuation.”

“Exactly,” Debbie said. “As you alluded to before, I wouldn’t be surprised if he *was* a poet, or is in a field where he has to write very precisely. Here’s more proof.” She clicked to the next screen.

You looked beautiful tonight, but your Big Stud’s a waste of time.

You’re still as good as dead.

Gina shifted in her chair. *She looks beautiful in the daytime, too*, Doug thought. He watched as she shoved a hand through her hair, her jaw tightening. How long would he be able to stay angry with her?

“Again we see the pattern of capitalization,” Debbie continued. “But that’s not what’s telling. E-mail, except when it’s used as business communication, tends to be informally written – not as informal as texting or instant messaging, but still rather loose. In a lot of instances, it’s rushed out, so it’s not uncommon to see usage errors or misspellings.”

“As in, who uses the spellchecker when they e-mail?” said Doug.

“I do,” Gina said quickly.

“Because you’re a lawyer,” said Debbie. “And the need for precision is ingrained. But look at the use of the word *you*.” She aimed the laser pointer again. “How many countless people mix up the words *your* and *you’re* in everyday writing? And who would use *as* between *still* and *good*? I think it could be assumed that when the perp wrote this, he was agitated or even angry, but still all the rules of grammar and usage are adhered to, all the words spelled correctly, all the punctuation in place.” She turned off the laser pointer. “This is a very meticulous, educated man.”

“Are you sure it *is* a man?” asked Doug.

“Sure, and I’ll tell you why. A woman wouldn’t praise another woman’s physical attributes, then tack on violence to tear them down. It’s the same thinking that goes into rape. It’s not for the sex, it’s for control. But men are more physically oriented. A woman would use a more abstract route. She’d play with the person’s head, maybe even internalize it, saying something like ‘if you do this, I will kill myself. Then it’ll all be your fault.’ Women are great at getting at men by inflicting a feeling of helplessness in them, which is especially effective because of men’s natural instinct to fix things.”

“So, in essence,” Doug said, boring his gaze into Gina’s, “women are more devious.”

Debbie laughed. “Oh, without question!”

Gina gripped the arms of her chair, her steely composure returning. “So what have we got here?”

“In summation, counselor?” Debbie perched on the edge of her desk. “I’d say you’re dealing with an educated South Jersey man who works in some field of communication.”

“And who probably has a beef with DNA technology.”

Debbie crooked her head at Gina, momentarily mystified. “Oh, because of that one e-mail, you think?”

“Right,” said Gina. “Remember? DNA equals ‘do not arrest’.”

Debbie looked askance for a second, scratching her neck. “Hmm, right. But you

know, Gina? I really don't think that's the most telling point."

"But how could you not? The way Jack and I figure it, it's the whole reason he's after me. For the lobbying I did for the DNA Clearance Act. We're thinking it's some random nut who blames the Act for springing someone he still thinks is guilty."

Debbie winced. "If that's true, then, Gina, it may be worse than I thought. I don't know how to put this to you, but from the looks of what we have here..." She leaned forward, squeezing Gina's hand. "Sweetie, I think he knows you."

* * * *

"Pull over," Gina said, her hand on the door.

Doug had just turned onto Route 38. "What? Why?"

"I said, pull over!" she cried, yanking on the handle.

"Okay," he said, turning the car into Strawbridge Lake Park. Before they came to a stop she jumped out, trotting up the dirt path to the lake. Doug shut the car off and went after her.

He found her on a bench facing the water, her head in her hands. He said nothing as he sat at the opposite end, his hands in his pockets. The trees on the other side of the lake were lit with fall colors, the sunny day reflecting the reds, oranges and golds in the mirror-still water. If it had been a normal day in a somewhat normal world, Doug would have remarked on the swans paddling toward them, the leaves falling slowly around them, the trout that just leapt from the water. But he kept quiet. Because his girl was hurting and he didn't know how to fix it.

His girl.

"Come here," he said, pulling her to him.

"Oh, Doug," she said, snaking her arms under his jacket, burying her face into his tie. "Please don't hate me, please don't. I couldn't stand it if you did."

He kissed the top of her head. "I don't hate you." *I love you.*

He blinked. *He loved her.* He always had. It had never gone away. Not for one second.

“I don’t hate you,” he repeated, pulling her closer. “And I won’t let anyone hurt you.” That much was certain. He’d take a bullet again before he’d ever let it happen.

She snuffled, squeezing him. “Well, that’s good.” She tugged at his holster. “Because I really don’t know how to shoot one of these things. I tried once and I damn near killed myself.”

“If there’s any shooting to be done, promise you’ll leave it to me.”

“Of course. That’s a promise I don’t even have to make.”

He tipped her chin toward him. “That’s one.”

Gina held his gaze for a moment, then pulled away. She leaned forward, folding her arms atop her knees, her eyes fixed on the lake.

“I haven’t been completely honest with you.”

He said nothing.

She turned, meeting his gaze over her shoulder. “As you may have expected.” Then she stood, walking a tree a few feet away. She braced herself against it, her back to Doug.

“I never told you much about myself, have I? Even from before.” She reached to pluck a leaf from overhead. “Maybe because we had so little real time together, with me always off on a plane to the next Party strategy session, the next rally, the hottest candidate. And then when I *would* see you...” Her shoulders raised, slumped. “My God, Doug, when I’d get back and you’d kiss me...” She shivered, tossing the leaf in the air. “It was all I could do to breathe, let alone form a coherent thought. You damn near worked me to a nub, inside and out.”

He was glad her back was turned. Because he wasn’t sure how she’d take him smiling. It was true, back in those heady first days. He’d never met a woman like her before, never so voluptuous, so adventurous, so intelligent, so brave. From the first moment he saw her, he had to have her, watching her strut around that courtroom like she owned it, seeing her eyes flash when she called an objection, marveling at her canniness in cross-examination, silently cheering her on even as he testified for the prosecution.

Truth be told, she mesmerized him, like a shiny penny on a string. She was flash and purpose all rolled into one, an intoxicating mixture of brains and steel and body, and once he'd had her he couldn't get enough, his desire increasing exponentially every time he sank himself into her.

"I think I know the feeling," he said.

She turned, coming back to the bench. "Then you know what I mean," she said, sitting just far enough away so their bodies didn't touch, even though he could still feel her heat. "But I want you to know me now, Doug. I think you should. I think it would help you understand me." She looked away. "That is, if you want to."

He reached and squeezed her hand. "Of course I do."

"Good. Because I really want you to know." She closed her hand over his, taking a deep breath before she started. "My parents divorced when I was really young, as they were really young themselves, not even twenty. Neither of them wanted me, so my grandmother kept me until I was nine. But then she remarried, and her new husband wanted to move to Florida to this place that didn't allow kids, so my Aunt Erika on my dad's side took me. She was single, a court reporter, and real strict. She didn't want me to be alone in the house after school, so she would have me walk to the courthouse and sit in the back of whatever courtroom she had a trial in. At first I was mad because I couldn't play or watch TV like the other kids, but then I got to listening and the more I did, the more fascinated I became.

"After a while I got to know all the prosecutors and a lot of the defense attorneys, the rules of court procedure, the judges, the dockets. The sheriff's deputies were all my friends. I was the pet of the courthouse, and loved every minute of it, and by the time I was twelve I knew I wanted to be a lawyer. And with Riverboro being the county seat, there were always politicians around, so when I graduated from high school, I was sailing into college on Party scholarships, my freshman summer spent as a congressional page in Washington, courtesy of the third district."

"So that's how it went," Doug said. "And I had to prostitute myself with the Army

before I could get the money to go to college.”

“You were in the Army?”

“Stateside, Germany, then Kuwait. An MP.”

She threw out her hands. “See? We never knew this about each other.” She looked back to the lake. “But I expect there’s a lot we don’t know.”

His hand went to her hair, smoothing it over her shoulder. “I’m an open book. All you have to do is ask.”

“Oh, Doug, I’m not trying to hide things from you, I’m really not. But no matter how much I try, I can’t stop competing with myself, as crazy as that sounds. Sometimes I think I’m more competitive than a man could ever be. And I can’t stop. I just have to keep going and going until it’s just perfect, because if I make it perfect, then maybe I’ll be, too. And maybe when I am, I’ll be able to stay in one place.”

“With one person.”

She looked at him. “Yes. Then no one will ever leave me again.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “Maybe that could be me.”

She sighed. “Oh, Doug.”

He pulled her to him. “Would you like that? No, don’t answer. I don’t want to know.” He tilted her head back. “Not now.”

He kissed her like he had never kissed her before. It was borne of sympathy and friendship and the truest kind of love, and a weird kind of kinship he had no way to explain. And it was mutual, it seemed, as she kissed him the same way back, her lips lightly brushing over his before she broke it.

“I don’t want to be scared, but I can’t help it,” she whispered.

He leaned his forehead against hers. “You don’t have to be. I’m here and I’ll take care of you.”

“No matter what happens? No matter what you find out?”

She was testing him. And still hiding something, he was certain. But he didn’t care. He had to have her and he would. For keeps. *No matter what.*

“Yes,” he said, more roughly than he intended. “No matter what.”

She closed her eyes. “Good.”

When she said that, everything chaste flew out the window. He pressed her back to the bench, his lips seizing hers, his tongue lunging to meet her own. She groaned and he felt himself hardening.

“Doug, Doug...” she moaned, her arms wrapping around his neck, her hips raising to grind against his. He slipped his hand into her jacket and found her breast, squeezing until she jolted against him. Then her eyes flew open.

“Good God, Doug!” she whispered, frantic. “We’re outside in a public park!”

“I know.” He looked around. But he didn’t see anyone. Except a man walking a dog way up near the road and... “Let’s go back to the hotel.”

“Doug, we’re outside. *In a public park.*” Then she smiled, slow and saucy.

There was no missing her meaning. He hardened even more. “Come on,” he said, pulling her to her feet.

He looked around. There was a utility shed about twenty feet away, a clump of bushes behind it. When he turned to Gina, she nodded. This was what he loved about her. They made for it.

It was an old shed of cedar shingles, but she didn’t seem to care. She leaned against it and planted her three-inch heels into the mulchy ground, looking to Doug with anticipation. He didn’t intend to disappoint. He fell to his haunches, then pushed her skirt up her thighs, sliding her panties down until she stepped out of them. He stuffed them into his pocket, then turned back to her pussy as she grabbed his shoulders for support.

“We don’t have much time,” she said, glancing left and right.

“Sorry, doll. Can’t always be your sixty-minute man, you know.” Then he grabbed a hold of her thighs and pulled her to his mouth.

“Damn!” she yelped, Doug devouring every inch of her pussy. She was hot and sweet and just as he liked her, his tongue tracing every crevice, every fold, his finger sliding into her vagina. When it did, she came like thunder, her pussy trembling against

his mouth, her moans low and earthy. He rose, kissing her quickly.

“Turn around,” he said, unzipping. “Spread your legs and lean against the shed.”

“Aye-aye, captain.” He slid her skirt over her ass, driving his cock into her pussy.

“Jesus,” he breathed, her muscles clenching around his shaft. His eyes half closed. It always had amazed him how good it felt to fuck her, how she could take nearly all of him, how he couldn’t get enough of her. When he started to move in and out, slowly at first, she groaned, her hips twitching as she fell into his rhythm. She felt so good, so much better than she’d ever felt before. He sped up, grabbing hold of her hip, angling himself deeper.

He reached out, bracing against the shed. “Doug...” she moaned, and he lost it.

Could a person really take this much pressure? This much pummeling? He didn’t know and damn it, he didn’t care. All he knew was Gina was coming again and he was about to, his mind tumbling toward that senseless, crazy place he lived to visit, never so much as with Gina. But he had just enough sense left to pull out, grab her panties and come into them, his semen soaking the silk until his palm went damp. Then he tossed them, Gina watching their flight into the bushes.

She turned just as he pulled her skirt down. “Doug, what the...?”

“Someone’s coming, Nature Girl,” he said, zipping. “We’d better get out of here.”

“You owe me some underwear,” she said, stumbling slightly when he tugged her.

* * * *

HOLLY HOUSE INN – RIVERBORO

“We can order room service,” Doug said, nuzzling her neck as they exited the elevator back at the Holly House Inn.

“But I’ve got to get to the office, if only for a little while.” Gina tilted her head to catch a quick kiss. “I probably have a million messages by now.”

He slung his arm over her shoulder as they walked up the hall. “Yeah, well, you’ve got to eat—” Suddenly he froze, pushing her behind him.

Gina followed his line of vision. Her door was opened, barely a quarter-inch.

“Get back,” Doug whispered, slowly raising his Glock.

Chapter Eight

HOLLY HOUSE INN – RIVERBORO

Gina gripped his arm. “But Doug, what if—”

“I said *get back*,” he hissed, shrugging her off. She finally relented, slinking back a few steps, her heart in her throat. *Oh God*, she thought, *if anything happens to him...*

He was nearly at the door of her suite, his hand already reaching for it. Gina pressed herself to the wall parallel, her hands flat against the wall, almost as if she was taking the building’s pulse. If it could talk, would it be as terrified as she was, with the man she loved walking straight into uncertainty? When he reached the door, he stopped. Cocking his pistol, he pushed the door open.

Gina held her breath. He walked in.

Silence. Something squeaked. Then more of it, interminable.

Then, “Gina?”

She swallowed. Hard. “Y-yes?”

He poked his head from the doorway. “Come on in.”

She did, to see her suite exactly how she left it.

Doug stood in the center of the living room, his Glock already holstered, his hands in his pockets.

“Nothing?” she asked.

He turned his head to the left and to right. “The bed’s still a mess. My toothbrush is exactly where I left it, and the towels are still on the floor. So, we couldn’t blame it on the maid.”

Gina took a quick look out the door. The housekeeping cart was still a few rooms away. “Maybe she was going to start but had to do something else. We can ask her. She’s just down the hall.”

He swiped a hand over his chin. “No, we won’t have to. She wasn’t here. But maybe her showing up scared someone away.” He went to the desk. “Were you at this

desk this morning?”

“No. I wasn’t even out here. We got up, took a shower.” She cast him a meaningful glance, and he returned it with a half-grin. “Then we got dressed and left.”

“You didn’t use the phone. The house phone, I mean.”

“Why should I? I have my BlackBerry.”

“To call the front desk, maybe?”

“Doug, you were practically behind me the whole morning.”

“A rather nice place to be.”

She smiled, the tension easing a bit. “Then you would know if I were using this phone, wouldn’t you? Why would you ask?”

He looked to the desk again. “It’s off the hook.”

She hadn’t noticed. But there it lay, the receiver on its side about six inches away from the base. “You know if you get a regular room, they charge fifty cents an outside call. Maybe if...”

Doug looked at her. Then he shook out a handkerchief from his pocket, picked the receiver up with it and pushed the red button for the front desk. After a few moments someone answered.

“Good afternoon,” Doug said. “I just have a question. Do you know if anyone made a call from this room this morning?” He paused, listening. “Thank you.” He hung up. He looked to Gina. “No calls.” Then he pulled the receiver cord out and, wrapping the phone in his handkerchief, stuck it in his pocket.

“Get your things together,” he said. “You’re checking out.”

“I am? But this is the only hotel in town. I’d have to go at least five miles away, and I know Jack wouldn’t like it—”

“Jack will survive,” Doug said, already walking toward the bedroom. By the time she caught up with him, he was tossing her suitcase to the bed.

“But where am I supposed to go? I can’t go too far. Oh damn, Doug. Maybe I should call the police after all.”

“No,” he said, “I finally agree with you on that point. Publicity will only bring out more crazies. Another hotel won’t do any good. Nor will any other place with a public entrance.”

She threw out her hands. “Then where do you expect me to go?”

“My place.”

“Your place? Over on Parker Square? Right next to that big office complex? A million people could blend in with no problem.”

He plucked a pair of shoes from the floor and threw them into the suitcase. “I moved out of there a long time ago. Where I live now, you’ll be as safe as a baby in its mama’s arms.”

She snatched up a carry-on, sliding bottles and jars into it. “Quiet, is it?”

Doug laughed softly. “Doll, it’s so quiet even the cops don’t go there anymore.”

Gina laughed, too, though barely. Why didn’t she like the sound of that?

* * * *

HENRY STREET – CAMDEN, NJ

Gina stepped from the car, her heel catching into an asphalt crevice. She yanked it out, cursing. To reach his stoop she had to walk around a pile of garbage, some of which had been recently burning. Since Henry Street had alternate-side-of-the-street parking, the opposite side simply parked on the sidewalk. On her side, the cars were lined bumper to bumper – that is, they would have been if they had bumpers. As far as she could see, every third or fourth house was either boarded up or a burned-out shell. The ones that weren’t had bars on the windows and double deadbolts. There were no shade trees besides the few stunted waste trees poking from the empty, garbage-strewn lots at either end of the block, no children playing, no sign of life in general. Potholes abounded, broken glass glittered in the curbs, the stop sign was missing from its pole. The stuccoed side of a building across the street was pitted with bullet holes. Gina cringed, scaling his bricked stoop, nearly losing her balance when a loose one wobbled under her shoe.

“Damn, got to fix that,” Doug said, cupping her elbow.

She grabbed the door handle, righting herself. *At least his old house didn't look too disreputable. But still...* “You’re kidding, right?”

He yanked her huge suitcase up a step. “What do you mean?”

She flung her hand toward the street. “You actually live here?”

He eyed her, impassive. “Yeah, I do.”

“I thought you said the neighborhood was quiet.”

“As quiet as a cemetery.”

“Because it *is* a cemetery.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He hauled the suitcase up one more step, then set it down, rooting his pockets for the keys. “The folks here might not be from the upper echelon, but they’re all decent working-class people just trying to make their way in the world.”

“Yeah, by robbing convenience stores.”

He found the key, shoving it into a lock. “You’ve been spending too much time in Georgetown, woman. You’re forgetting your roots. Not that they live on my block, but aren’t the very people you’re maligning the kind you used to defend?”

She looked at him. He was right, of course. Drug dealers, money launderers, weapons smugglers, robbers, thieves, murderers – she had defended them all. Most verdicts she had been proud of, some she had not, but in all she had done her best to the complete letter of the law. She didn’t regret the years she had spent as an attorney for the defense, but neither did she miss it. She was much more content where she was now.

Which was where?

A sudden thought coursed through her: where exactly *was* she now? She loved her position with Jack, no question about it. But now that she was reunited with Doug, after this weekend was over, where would their relationship take them? If Jack won the governorship, she’d be back in New Jersey. Trenton was an easy commute, even from Camden. But she’d have to be in Washington for at least another year. Could her and Doug’s still-shaky liaison survive the separation? She watched him enter a worn but surprisingly clean vestibule, the rubber-matted staircase ahead smelling of oiled wood

and recent disinfection. That coming separation was wishful thinking, at best. First it would have to survive what she'd yet to tell him.

"Come on," he said, yanking the strap of his own wardrobe bag to his shoulder, hefting her big suitcase. "I'm upstairs."

Gina caught a glimpse of the downstairs hall – two doors with numbers, a stroller tucked in the corner at the far end, a philodendron hanging from a hook by the window – before she crossed in front of Doug for the steps. He looked like a pack mule. "Let me get your bag," she said, reaching for it.

"I got it," he said, a bit indignant, and she relented, knowing better. She felt a pleasant little twinge at the memory of his bulging biceps, and she smiled, anticipating the feel of his hard body atop hers. Just as soon as they could manage it, she hoped.

"What are you smiling about?" he said.

She tilted her head toward the stairwell. "You have a bed up there?"

His eyes went cobalt. "You bet I do."

She thumbed his tie, pulled him close, brushed her lips over his. "Suddenly I'm very sleepy."

"Don't worry," he said, pulling her in for a deeply erotic kiss, "I got ways of waking you up—"

"Douglas! Douglas, is that you?"

He sighed against Gina's mouth, smiling sheepishly before once again hefting her suitcase. "Sure is, Miss Ella! Coming right up!" He looked to Gina. "Miss Ella owns the building. Hell of a nice lady."

"Sounds like she's your adoptive mother."

He thought about that for a moment. "Maybe she is. Come on."

Miss Ella was waiting for them when they reached the top. She had a broom in her hand and a wide lipsticked smile for Doug. "Douglas, a brick is loose on the stoop again. Somebody gonna kill themselves."

"I know, I'll get some mortar for it first thing." He looked to Gina. "Miss Ella? I

want you to meet my friend, Gina. Gina, Miss Ella.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Ella,” Gina said, smiling graciously.

The older woman gave her an impassive up-and-down before shooting her gaze to Doug. “I like the looks of this one. Damn sight better than the trash you been bringing here before.” She looked back to Gina. “That’s a compliment, miss, what I’m saying.”

Gina nodded. “Thank you.”

“Yes.” Doug laughed. “High praise. Gina will be staying with me for a couple of days. She works for Congressman Falco.”

At that, Miss Ella’s eyes widened. “You don’t say. Well, that is impressive. I’ve met him a few times. Nice man. Nice face, too.”

Doug set the suitcase to the floor. “Miss Ella’s a ward leader and works the polls every election. She’s also the secretary for the local Democratic Club.” He tilted his head to Gina. “Gina was with the DNC.”

Miss Ella smiled wide. “Well, well, young lady, you can stay here anytime. Douglas, I think you’d better marry this one.”

Gina felt herself turning crimson. “One step at a time, Miss Ella, one step.”

Doug raked back his hair and moved closer, lowering his voice. “Miss Ella, I have a favor to ask you. Gina’s being here is kind of on the hush now, so I’d appreciate it—”

“Say no more,” she said, holding up a hand. “My lips are zipped. Ain’t nobody’s business who in your house anyhow. So I won’t be saying a thing, don’t worry.”

“Thanks,” he said, picking up the suitcase. “I’ll get on that mortar first thing.”

She took one look at Gina, then went back to sweeping. “Sure you will, Douglas, but I ain’t holding my breath.”

He laughed, unlocking his door, standing aside to let Gina step in.

She stepped into a spartan space that was at first glance, surprisingly cozy. There was one big room, with a small kitchen, a closet, and what she assumed was a bathroom on one side. In the big space was a sofa, an easy chair and TV atop a bookcase near the entrance, the hardwood floor covered in a large, hooked rug. Opposite the door was

a window with dark, plaid curtains right next to – Gina’s eyes widened – the biggest, heaviest iron bed she had ever seen.

Gina dropped her carry-on, walking up to its painted cast iron footboard. “You weren’t kidding, were you?”

He ran his hand over its gleaming-white surface. “She’s a beauty, isn’t she? Was nothing but rust and chipping lead paint when I found her up in the attic. Miss Ella wanted to throw it out, but I asked her if I could have it. She looked at me like I was nuts, but she let me. Spent six months stripping, painting and putting her back together.” He pressed his hand to the plush dark blue quilt atop it. “Got a new mattress and box spring – hop on up.”

Gina stepped back, suddenly feeling a bit sick. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Why?” said Doug softly. “What’s wrong?”

It was irrational, and she knew it, as she hadn’t exactly been a saint. But she couldn’t help herself. With any other man it would’ve been ridiculous, but with Doug, it was unthinkable.

“I just can’t.” She dug her hand through her hair. “I know it doesn’t make sense, but just the thought of you making love with someone else in this—”

“Whoa, whoa, wait a minute...” he said, taking her by the shoulders. “*Making love?*” He stooped to look in her eyes. “Did you already forget what I told you last night? I haven’t fucked anyone since you. Don’t you believe me?”

She shrugged. “But what Miss Ella just said...”

“Miss Ella was exactly right. Because what she saw was what I should’ve never been disrespecting her house with in the first place. But when I did, I was usually too hammered to give a shit. You care to know?”

“Not really.”

“Too bad. I’m going to tell you anyway.” He turned. “See that wall?” He pointed to the bare space near the door. “What you see there is basically a crime scene. Because that’s where I committed one every now and then when I was too drunk or beyond caring

to get it in an alley. Where whatever whore I managed to buy off of Ferry Ave. would open my pants and blow me before I'd stuff a twenty down her tits and toss her back on the street."

He turned, gripping her arms again. "Making love? Is that what you think it was? All it was was come shots down a lot of strangers' throats. Strangers who didn't give a damn about me past how much money they could get or if maybe I'd forget seeing them buying a bag of smack the week before. Trust me, there was no love made here. Could you say the same thing, wherever the hell you've been?"

She couldn't look at him. "No. But it's not the same."

"Oh yeah?" He dropped his hands, staring dead into her. "No," he said, taking a step back. "I guess it wasn't. You were probably in love with them. Far as I know, you maybe still are."

He may as well have stuck a knife in her heart. "Oh Doug, that's so not true. Those men – and believe me when I say there weren't that many – I was never in love with any of them." She turned back to the big bed, gripping the iron bars. "They were a balm against loneliness, a desperate attempt to get over you."

"Get over *me*? Sweetheart, you *do* have a short memory. You were the one who left, remember?"

She gripped the bars tighter. "What I remember is you throwing me out."

"You wanted to kill our baby!"

She punched his chest. "An embryo, which was so much more important than a living, breathing *me*."

His eyes narrowed. "Never."

"Oh really? It's what you're all about, Doug, from the first time we were together. Remember that day? Fucking on the credenza? When you came in me without a condom, you swore you'd marry me if I got pregnant. And you never mentioned it again until weeks later, when you found out I was." She moved to the other side of the bed. "You guard your sperm like they're some kind of precious jewels. And the one time you didn't,

the one time you gifted me with your hallowed spunk, I became nothing more to you than some broodmare to carry your genius to the next generation.”

He stared at her from across the bed, his face going crimson. “Where do you get this shit? I loved you!”

“Because I was pregnant!”

“Dammit, woman!” He slammed his fist to the bed. “Haven’t you figured it out yet? You were pregnant *because* I loved you! Can’t you see that?”

“No,” she said, coming around to him. “I don’t believe you. If that were true, then why won’t you come in me now? I’m even on the pill and you still won’t. You come on my dress, my underwear, my tits, in my ass. In my mouth the same way you did with your whores, but *in* my vagina? Never.” She ripped off her jacket, rushing to the blank space by the side of the door. “Come on over here, Doug. Press yourself against the wall and let me suck your sacred sperm, then you can shove twenty bucks down my tits.” She lifted her skirt, still naked underneath from their tryst in the park, her eyes wild, her nails scraping the plaster. “Come and make love to me as if I were your whore.”

* * * *

Rage. Pure and white hot, he lunged at her like an animal, teeth bared, claws out, pouncing. When he landed, he was pressing her against the wall, ripping at her clothes, his mouth biting hers. She slapped him, his face, his ears, but he couldn’t feel any of it, so perfect was his anger, so precise his lust. Her blouse came off in tatters, some buttons clattering to the hardwood, two or three bouncing to land silently on the rug. He shoved his hand up her skirt, yanking at her garter belt. She squirmed, stockings running, his hands sliding to her ass, lifting her up. When he ripped her skirt he made his fatal error, freeing her to knee him solidly in the belly. He reeled back, and wind gone, fell to his knees.

“Ha!” she laughed, triumphant, her candy-red pumps taking a celebratory strut around him. She yanked off her ruined skirt, tossing it into his face. “Look at the big stud now,” she said, bending over. “You’re fucking pathetic.”

He took a gulp of air, regaining his breath, watching her. Bra, garter belt, ruined stockings, those pumps. That was it and that was too much. When she bent over him, he could see halfway to heaven, when she turned, her ass was Eden. But that pussy – *that pussy*. A perfect triangle of glossy black mystery, what men lusted, fought and died over. He understood it now. Fully. The thought of anyone – *anyone* ever coming near her sent his blood boiling again. He shrugged off his jacket, loosened his tie, a bead of sweat trickling down his face.

“Pathetic,” she repeated, crossing her arms.

His eyes swiveled upwards: her fatal error. He lunged again, knocking her to the floor.

“Bastard!” she cried, rolling over, squirming loose to climb to her feet. But he was on her in a second, twisting her arm behind her, pushing her face first into the bed.

He held her there, squashing her hand to her back with his knee, while he shrugged off his holster, while he yanked his tie over his head, while he ripped his own shirt from him. Her legs kicked futilely while he unbuckled his belt, as he unzipped she cursed him repeatedly. He spread her legs and shoved himself inside her.

She screamed.

He didn’t care. He didn’t care if she screamed, if anyone heard, if the walls came tumbling down. All he cared was that he was buried deep and she was under him. But it wasn’t enough and he knew it.

“Bastard,” she whimpered, fingers bunching the quilt.

He pulled out, turning her over.

She looked up at him, her chest heaving, her eyes shiny with tears.

He had never been more ashamed.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, his heart clenching.

“So am I,” she answered. “Over and over again.”

“*Gina*.”

“Kiss me.”

He fell into her, mouth, body, lips, raising up as she wrapped her legs around him, his cock slipping into her easily. As he held her on the edge of the bed he began to move, kicking off his shoes as her candy-red pumps crossed over his ass, sliding his trousers down his legs. He stepped out of them and lowered her back to the bed.

He fell in deeper, her pussy like velvet, her tightness indescribable. As he fucked her she groaned softly, but he needed to give her more. He pulled up and flicked her bra open, and her gorgeous, full breasts tumbled out. He took a nipple into his mouth, sucking hard, pulling, tugging, sliding his tongue around the areola until his lips rested just south of it. Then he sucked, burning brand after brand across one breast and then the other, until she writhed and stiffened beneath him, clawing her nails down his back.

“Gina,” he groaned, kissing her, sucking her tongue, devouring her.

His mouth savaged hers, biting and nipping, her hips arching into his. Then she dragged her mouth away, kissing a trail down his chest to land at a nipple. She sucked it into her mouth, pulling, tugging, too, until he felt a burning deep within his groin and he pumped faster, driving deeper inside her. Then she let loose, her mouth trailing again, until she stopped near his right breast, the tiny remainder, precariously close to his heart. When she kissed it he froze.

“I’ll never forgive myself for leaving you that morning,” she said softly. “Never until the day I die.”

“Don’t,” he said, kissing her forehead. “Don’t ever say that again.”

“I’ll say what I want. Just like this.” She kissed him, whispering against his mouth, “I’ll never leave you again.”

All at once, his head was spinning. “Gina, dammit, Gina.” He shook it quickly, clearing it somewhat. Then he leaned into her, his heart to hers, the autumn sun turning her face to gold.

He pushed himself up until his arms nested around her, her chestnut hair spilling about her head, her lips deep red and swollen from their kissing, her face flushed. When her sherry eyes looked into his, heavy-lidded and smoldering with heat, his heart surged

with inexplicable joy.

“I love you,” he said, kissing her. “I always have, and I always will.”

She gasped, and it was all he could stand. He pushed himself up and pumped his hips, fucking her until she cried out again, her neck arching in climax. Then so was he, his body stiffening, spiraling, blinded by a white-hot spasm of pleasure so intense he collapsed against her, his cock pulsing and throbbing as he emptied every ounce of himself into her. After a few moments he rolled to her side, breathing heavily, his cock still buried within her.

She smiled, brushing her fingers down his cheek. “Thank you.”

“The pleasure was all mine,” he said with a grin. He kissed her hand. “I love you.”

“I’m glad. Ecstatic.” She laughed. “Truly. And hungry.”

“For food?”

“For food. For *everything*.”

Incredibly, he began to harden again. *Everything* would have to come first. He rolled up, raising himself over her.

* * * *

FIFTH DISTRICT, CITY OF CAMDEN, NJ POLICE DEPARTMENT
DETECTIVE UNIT

“So that’s her,” Captain Halchak said, snapping the blind back into place.

Doug glanced to where she stood, chatting with Stewart as he poured her a cup of hours-old coffee. “That’s her. The infamous Gina Bardone.”

“Getting along better, I suspect?”

He tugged at his collar, smug in what lay beneath. “You can say that.”

“And so can you.” He glanced to his desk and the handkerchief Doug was unwrapping. “Whatcha got there?”

“Someone strolled into Gina’s room while we were at Falco’s office this morning. Left this off the hook. Thought I’d run it by the lab.”

“You don’t say. Hey, someone called today looking for you. Fellow by the name of Parks.”

“Oh, yeah. Falco’s county campaign manager. Did he say what he wanted?”

“Only to call him. Something about a list.”

“From the fundraiser we went to last night. Whoever’s sending those e-mails, he was there.”

Halchak perched on the end of his desk. “Narrowing it down, then?”

He glanced out the doorway. Gina waved. “Oh, yeah. In more ways than one.”

Chapter Nine

FIFTH DISTRICT, CITY OF CAMDEN, NJ POLICE DEPARTMENT INVESTIGATIONS LABORATORY

“There aren’t any.”

Gina stared at the technician. “No prints at all? But that’s ridiculous. That phone’s from a public hotel. Unless...” Her gaze snapped to Doug’s.

“It’s been wiped clean,” he said, finishing her thought.

She picked up the piece of plastic. “Which is even more scary if you think about it. That someone went through all the trouble.”

“To leave us now with nothing.” Doug nodded to the man “Thanks, Sid. If you don’t mind, I’d like it if you didn’t mention this.”

“Sure thing,” he said, sliding a dusting brush into a tube. “Sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

As they walked to the car, Gina latched hold of Doug’s arm. “Who was in my room, Doug?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But whomever they were, they were either really stupid or really smart.” He pulled her closer. “You hungry?”

She nipped his sleeve. “Ravenous. I haven’t had anything in me besides coffee – and *you*, all day.”

“Likewise, doll,” he said, squeezing her fingers. “What do you say we take a hop over the bridge.”

“To Philly?” She looked to the west, the sunset coloring the skyline. “Where shall we go?”

“I know just the place.”

* * * *

TAVERN 17 RESTAURANT

RADISSON PLAZA-WARWICK HOTEL – RITTENHOUSE SQUARE

PHILADELPHIA, PA

“Your table’s ready, sir.”

“Thank you.” He looked to Gina. “Shall we?”

“Oh, absolutely.” She rose off the bar stool, taking her wineglass with her. “Three sips off of this and I’m already buzzed, I’m so hungry.”

“Well, we’re going to fix that, real quick.” Doug took his wine, too, the taste of it so civilized, he hadn’t realized he missed it so much. For so long his alcohol imbibment had been as essential as clothing and heat, such a private function his flask had become a permanent part of his anatomy. But since Gina...he wasn’t even sure where it was now.

He watched her move between the tables behind the maître’d, her hips swiveling around a planter. God, she had such a gorgeous ass. How he’d love to bend her over a table, lift her dress and pile-drive her, right here in front of everyone. He smiled, imagining their faces. Shocked. Amazed. Jealous. *She’s mine*, he’d say, to each and every one of them. *She’s mine, and you can’t have her.*

Was she? She did say she’d never leave him. But did she say it out of love or pity? *I’ll never forgive myself for leaving you that morning.* Or guilt. There was that. He could never stand it if it was out of pity, but could he live with her without love? Maybe for

right now what was between them was enough. She took a seat at the table, smiling up at him. Because he knew damn well he could never live without her again.

Doug draped the napkin across his lap, scanning the menu. Wasn't a few seconds before he closed it. "I've made up my mind. It's the porterhouse. Definitely."

Gina closed hers as well. "Oh yeah. *Beef*. I just can't get enough." Her eyes sparkled, her hand slipping under the table to his knee.

He grabbed it. "Don't start with me woman, I'm warning you."

She slid her hand up to his package, giving it a squeeze. "Oh yeah? What're you going to do about it?"

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. Because there in the dim warmth of the diningroom light, as he leaned in and slipped his hand under the table, under the cloak of the tablecloth, he gave her his answer.

The dress she wore that evening was a vision of sex. Sleeveless, a Roman drape, a deeply-bodiced slink of silk that flowed full-skirted over her trim waist to her knees. He slid his hand up her flinching thigh to the smoldering join of her legs, his gaze fixed on hers. When he found her clit (wearing panties has long proved useless) she jumped.

Her eyes flared. "*Doug!*"

He leaned in even closer. "You were saying...?"

"I don't think..." Her eyes fluttered.

"Don't. Think," he murmured, flicking her clit. And flicked. And flicked. Then he slipped his finger inside her.

She bit her lip, her fingernails digging into the tablecloth, her body as rigid as marble.

He withdrew, sucked the tip of his finger and straightened, reopening his menu just as the waiter approached their table and said—

"Good evening sir, madam. Can I interest you in anything from our fine wine cellar?"

Doug held up his wineglass, regarding the ruby-red liquid. "This was very good."

He looked to Gina. “Shall we try a bottle?”

Her hands slipped to her lap, her mouth opened with nothing coming out.

“Fine, sweetheart.” He looked to the waiter. “I believe it was a pinot. Could you check with the bartender? We just came from there.”

“Very good, sir.” He left.

He looked to Gina. “You all right, doll?”

Her eyes flared. “Jesus, Doug – I was still coming!”

“It’s becoming a regular habit with you, isn’t it?” He tsked. “And here we are, in a public place...”

She leaned in, gripping his arm. “Oh, you are so going to pay for that.”

He leaned in, kissing her nose. “I can’t wait. But then again, anticipation is nine-tenths of the process, isn’t it?”

* * * *

Gina had no idea how they made it through dinner. If it wasn’t for the fact she was famished beyond reason, she would have dragged him out of the room by his necktie. Tossed him into the nearest closet and ripped off his trousers. Didn’t help he looked so goddamned fabulous tonight. In nothing more than a plain gray-flannel suit. But it was more than that. He had a glow about him. His eyes nearly shimmered, his skin looked flush with health, his smile was never wider. She knew the reason well enough. He looked a man in love.

With her. *With her!*

He stood, reaching for her hand. When she took it and he smiled – God help her – she fell in love with him all over again.

For the tenth time that day.

Not that she could tell him. Not yet, anyway. Not until she was sure.

His arm was around her as they left the restaurant. “I can’t wait,” she whispered, leaning in.

He kissed her temple. “My thoughts exactly. Hold on.”

Within minutes, they were at the front desk. "I'd like a room."

The clerk looked up. "Do you have a reservation, sir?"

"Actually, no."

The clerk tapped at his computer, then frowned. "I'm sorry, but we have three conventions in town, and everything is—"

Doug *a-hemed*, proffering his detective's shield.

The clerk glanced to Gina. She smiled sweetly. And back to Doug. "I see."

"Special investigation," Doug whispered, snapping it closed. "You understand?"

"Certainly, sir." He tapped some more. "Ah. It appears we have a King room on the Plaza Club level."

"Imagine that. We'll take it."

"Excellent. Driver's license and credit card, please." A minute more and Doug slid the key card from the counter. "Any luggage, sir?"

He pulled a toothbrush from his pocket. "I think I can manage."

His brow arched. "Take the first elevator to your left."

"Many thanks." He pressed his hand to the small of Gina's back. "Privilege does have its rewards."

She laughed. "You're a devious little bastard, you know?"

His hand slipped to her ass as they stepped into the elevator. "There's nothing *little* about me, doll."

"Really?" She looped her arms around his neck as the door thunked shut. "I think I'm going to need firm evidence of that."

He pulled her to him, kissing her hard, fast. "Enough with the metaphors. Let me give it to you straight. I'm going to fuck the living shit out of you. Is that plain enough?"

"I'm not sure," she said, stepping away. "Can you give me an example?" The elevator stopped and she slipped the key card into the slot. When the door opened, she fairly shot out.

By the time they got to their room they were both breathing heavily. Doug grabbed the key card from her and shoved it into the lock. He pulled her inside, kicking the door shut behind him.

Jacket, tie to a chair, holstered weapon on the night table, shoes flung one foot at a time across the room. She dropping her coat and purse to the floor. They stood facing each other, her hands frantically working his belt buckle, his arms flung around her unzipping her dress. She pulled out his shirt, unbuttoning as he slid her dress up her hips. She raised her arms, and over her head it went.

Jungle animal print bra and garter belt. Stockings. Three-and-a-half inch black, peep-toed pumps.

Opened Oxford shirt, black socks, trousers unzipped halfway down. Corralling one raging hard-on, ready to split the seams.

Gina's eyes flashed to his and she leapt forward, pushing him back to the bed.

"My turn now," she breathed, yanking his trousers from him.

She noticed he, too, had cottoned to the futility of underwear. He shrugged out of his shirt as she slipped off his socks. He shimmied back to the headboard and braced his muscled arms atop it, spreading his legs slightly, his cock at full attention. As she began to climb on the bed, he stopped her with a lift of his brow.

"As much as I love the tease I want everything off."

She thumbed her garter belt, her bush glistening. "Even this?"

His cock twitched. "Everything," he rasped, swallowing hard. "Fair is fair."

"Well...okay." She reached behind her and unsnapped the bra, leaning forward to shrug it off, arching her back as she righted herself. She then pulled a chair from the desk and propped her foot atop it, unsnapping one garter from one leg at a time and slipping off her shoes, methodically rolled her stockings off. She glanced to Doug, he hadn't moved an inch, his eyes fixed on her, rapt. Then standing up, she turned around and slowly slid her garter belt over her ass, bending forward to push it down her legs. When it hit her ankles she stepped out of it and touched her toes. She spread her legs slightly,

brandishing her slickened clit, a little shot of pleasure racing through her when she heard his throat clear expansively.

“Get up here,” he said, most authoritatively.

She righted herself and turned, raising her arms to push her hair back. But before she could take a step he said—

“Wait.” His eyes bored into hers. “Leave the shoes on.”

Her head quirked. “Excuse me?”

His hands gripped the headboard, his biceps bulging precipitously. “I said...*leave the shoes on.*”

She smiled as wickedly as she could. And slipping them on, went at him.

Gina climbed atop the big bed, crawling at him like some predatory creature. She stopped at his foot. “I sense a bit of a foot fetish, my darling. I think this needs a little more exploration.” She pinched his big toe between fingers and sucked it into her mouth.

He groaned.

“Ah. Just as I suspected.” She sucked each toe, from one foot to the other, Doug growling at her, threatening to bite hers off. “Now why would you do that, Dougie? What would that leave to peep out my peep toes?”

He grinned at her. “Biding my time, doll, just biding my time..”

“Really.” She gave his toes one more thorough going over before kissing and sucking and licking her way to his groin. “Now this is where it gets interesting,” she said, slowly spreading his legs.

She moved between them, her hands on his knees, raising up to brush her pussy against his balls, his cock. She ground herself against him, inching up until her clit rested against the rigid underside of his shaft, where she painfully, methodically, rubbed against him, letting her slit circle the glistening head of his cock until he moaned, pushing against her.

“Not yet,” she said, sliding her pussy to his taut belly. She let her hot juices

slicked his soft hairs as his cock twitched and throbbed against her ass. Then she turned atop him, and arching up on her knees, sucked his shaft down her throat.

He gasped, his ass lifting off the bed as Gina tightened her lips around him and pulled, receding and ascending, up and down, a couple dozen times. Her lips came to rest at his silky-soft crown, her tongue circling and sucking until she tasted the barest hint of his come trickling into her mouth. From here she let his cock slide from her lips and went to work instead on his balls, rolling one at a time in her mouth

“Ahhh...” he groaned, his legs shifting, his hand sliding to her hips. As she kissed and licked and flicked her tongue against his balls, she suddenly became aware of his finger entering a vagina so hot and slick she was sure she’d burn him.

Which made her think of the one thing that set Doug apart from all the men she had ever known – aside from the obvious, of course. He was a master at pleasing women, expertly, howlingly so. From the caress of his lips, to the tip of his extraordinary cock, he knew how to coax and tease and explode an orgasm out of her, and usually many more. As in now as his finger explored, seeking her G-spot or whatever magic button he had ferreted out, she could already feel herself rising. Add to that the touch and taste of his cock and balls in her mouth, his ripped body between her legs, and she damn well felt ready to launch off the bed.

“Enough,” he said roughly, his finger receding, his hands sliding to her ass. “Time to fuck.”

“Not yet,” she said, her mouth once again circling his head. “I’m not quite – *erp!*”

He had grabbed hold of her three-and-half-inch heels and yanked her feet from under her. She fell splat on his legs, only to feel them slide away before he pushed her back up on her knees. She latched onto the footboard, steadying herself.

“Hence the reasoning behind the shoes,” she said, feeling him positioning himself behind her. “Traitorous things.”

“Quiet,” he said, spanking her soundly before he shoved himself inside her.

“Jesus!” she yelped, his hands falling to her hips, her bottom deliciously burning, his cock pummeling her mercilessly. It wasn’t a moment later and she was climaxing, her neck arching, her clit throbbing against his balls. She was coming so hard she lost her balance and fell over, Doug losing his, too, both of them tumbling off the bed.

“Son of a bitch! – are you all right?” Saying this as he was still fucking her, Gina under him, laughing. He kissed her neck and rolling her over, grabbed her ankles, sliding her legs over his shoulders.

She was raw and exposed and nearly folded in half – and so aroused she thought she’d explode. He slid her legs down a bit and re-entered her, ramming into her with such force it sent a jolt through her clear up to her belly button.

Gina came again, quickly and cleanly. Before it receded he lowered her legs, arching above her now, moving his hips slowly and succinctly, his eyes closed, his mouth slightly opened. As he moved she watched his muscles expand and contract, the bulges of his arms, his tightly mounded pectorals, the hard ridges of his abs. Across his chest she noticed his taut veining, a circulatory highway leading up his neck, to a jaw that clenched as his breath came hard, straining to hold back his release. Holding back for her, she knew, holding back for her pleasure.

Lord, she was a selfish woman. And he, such a hungry man. But maybe it was that hunger that made her so selfish, as if she wasn’t she’d have nothing left to give. He took everything out of her, leaving her naked, exposed. How liberating to be that honest.

If only she was.

She wished she could tell him, she longed for the courage, and she would, or they’d never be at peace. But first she needed to get through this, and she would do that, too – she was sure of it. Because now he was here, and he could do anything.

“Gina...” he murmured, sitting up, pulling her with him. He nestled her in his lap, his knees bent, her legs arched beside him. “So beautiful,” he whispered, kissing her deeply. “Christ, I love to fuck you.”

She leaned back against his legs. “Do you?” She lifted herself off from him,

slamming her pussy down. “Do you really?” And again and again. “Because if you love to fuck me so much, then why...” She did it again. “Why am I doing all the work?”

His eyes flared.

He pulled himself from her and Gina to her feet, whipping her around to leave her braced against the footboard. It was so high the top nearly came to her hips, and she latched onto it, steadying herself. She had hardly gotten her bearings before Doug nudged her legs opened and tilting her ass, entered her pussy from behind.

She jolted as he rammed into her, digging her heels into the carpet to keep upright.

“Hence the reasoning behind the shoes,” he whispered hotly in her ear.

She turned her head, wrinkling her nose at him.

His response was a deftly-placed finger to her clit. “Hold on,” he said, preceding to pump fore and aft.

Her head slammed back against his shoulder as he tilted his hips to gain greater access, fucking her so hard, he nearly lifted her off the floor. Within seconds she was coming with a force almost painful, her mouth open wide and straining to scream. Before she could she felt his lips close over hers, his arms wrapping around her so tightly stars dotted her vision and then he was coming, brutally so. He huffed into her mouth, his cock throbbing deep within her, his tremoring body sending vibrations through her spine. When he was finished he pulled himself from her and twisted her around, his hand kneading her breast as he kissed her deeply and soundly. With his cock against her belly she felt his come flowing from her, snaking a rivulet down the inside of her thigh. She pressed her bush to his hip, leaving some against him.

He pulled back to look at her, his eyes a deep, deep blue. Then he dipped his finger to her pussy.

She gripped his shoulder, exhaling hard, never expecting it. It was simply the most intimate thing he’d ever done. Maybe it wouldn’t seem so to anyone else, but it certainly felt that way to her, Doug sliding his own come against her clit. Almost instantly

she climaxed, shaking as he swirled and circled, his hand flooding with his own juices when he sunk his finger into her. She raised up, pressing her lips to his.

“Gimme more,” she whispered, rubbing against him. “Give me everything you’ve got.” He sighed heavily then lifted her into his arms. She wrapped her legs around him and he slid himself in, carrying her to the bed.

This time was slow, easy, like the rock of a boat, Gina under him, Doug arching above her. When she came, so did he, an even undulation, a comfortable roll, a gift. When they were finished he pulled back the sheets and they slipped between them, Doug falling asleep quickly, softly snoring against her breast.

She brushed the back of her hand down his cheek. “I love you,” she whispered, safe in the knowledge he couldn’t hear her.

* * * *

Gina leaned up on her arm. “Where in God’s name are you going?”

Doug looked up from tying his shoe. *Jesus Christ*, he thought. Was there any woman in the world who looked as good naked as she did? “I thought I’d do a little investigating.”

She glanced at the bedside clock. “At this hour?”

“Well, come on, Gina. That’s what we’re here for, isn’t it? I won’t be long.”

“And you also won’t be going without me either.” She threw back the sheet and swung her legs over the side. “Give me a couple of minutes to freshen up,” she said, grabbing fallen clips to pile her hair atop her head. “I won’t be long.”

As he heard the shower raining, he suppressed the urge to follow her. Knowing full well if he did that, they’d never leave the room. He glanced to the door, contemplating going without her. Not a good idea, either. He hated the idea of leaving her alone even for a minute, as much as taking her with him left her wide open for a target. There simply was no compromise. Until Sunday he’d just have to be her conjoined twin. Not, he rubbed his chin, that that was such a horrible prospect.

He got up, slipped into his holster, smelling her perfume on his jacket when he

pulled it on, his gaze falling to her stockings draped over a chair. He picked one up, smiling as he slid it between his fingers, teetering between happiness and disbelief. How was this possible? He just couldn't figure it out. *One day at a time*, he told himself. Damn, where had he heard that before? He picked up the remote, clicking to ESPN.

Ten minutes later, Gina emerged, naked, fluffed and looking for her clothes. "Jesus," she huffed, hands to hips, "where the hell are they?"

"Here," Doug said, pointing to the sofa. He had them lined up in sequence order. "I picked them up while you were sleeping. They were all over the floor." He took a step closer. "Woman – you are an animal."

"Stay away," she said, brushing past him. "As it is, the friction is killing me."

Ten minutes more they were out in the hall. "Now what?" she said.

Doug looked to a brochure in his hand. "Says here there's a club lounge down the hall with complementary wifi. That's as good a place as any to start." They found a couple of computers tucked in a corner of the empty room. Doug sat at one, Gina looking over his shoulder.

"What're you doing?" she asked as he quickly went into administrative mode. "Damn – how'd you get there? That should be password-protected."

"Anything gated is just asking to be opened," he said, scrolling files. "Public computers are notorious for viruses and a thousand other infections with all the fingerprints left on them." He clicked out. "Nope, nothing came from here."

"But how do you know?"

"Because I just scrolled through all the Yahoo mail temporary files, and not one of them matched the time stamp on the one you got."

"Oh. Well, that's easy enough."

"If you know what to look for." He switched to the other one. "This one either."

Gina looked at him, amazed. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

"Hackers, where else? Arrested a couple of guys not too long ago plying their trade for dope. Both of them have job offers from Microsoft when they get out. You

believe that?”

“I’d believe anything from you.”

“You’d better,” He took her arm. “Come on. There’s more downstairs.”

Four computers were tucked in a little alcove off the lobby. Halfway through the third one, he sat back, tapping the screen. “Bingo – here it is.”

She leaned in. “You sure?”

“Positive. Watch.” He tapped a bit more, bringing up the file’s history. “There it is, clear as day.” *yourbigfan2010*.

“Jesus, Doug, wouldn’t it be something if we could tap into this guy’s mailbox?”

He looked at her, grinning. “Who says we can’t? But not yet. There’s still some things a little bit more pressing.” He stood up, slipping his arm around her waist. “What’d you say we get a nightcap before we turn in?”

She leaned back, nuzzling his neck. “Just what I had in mind to soothe my frazzled nerves.” She winced. “And nerve endings.”

“Doll, I’m gonna have to toughen you up.” He kissed her temple. “Let’s go.”

Halfway to the bar, Gina stopped cold.

He followed her line of vision to a man, just turning, his eyes lighting with surprise. “Gina! Why, hello you two. Fancy seeing you here.”

“Hello, Lee,” she said, looking slightly dazed.

“I was just going for a drink,” he said, his composure smoothly restored. “Would you like to join me?”

She glanced to Doug. “I-I—”

“We’d love to,” said Doug, sweeping his hand. “Lead the way.”

Chapter Ten

RADISSON HOTEL

PHILADELPHIA

“Pinot noir, wasn’t it, Gina?” said Lee, half-sitting on a stool. “I recall a particular San Luis Obispo you used to swoon over.”

“Really?” Gina’s smile was brittle as she crossed her legs atop the bar stool. “I don’t remember.”

“Well, I do. It was that good. Lieutenant?”

“Thanks.” Doug took the double scotch Lee offered, preferring to stand. Because something about this Lee Roland sparked all his instincts, and he just might need to shove

his glass down the fucker's throat, especially if he kept scoping Gina's legs. He took a good swallow and forced himself to focus.

"Granger Canyon," said Lee. "'04, I believe, their best year for pinots." The bartender set a wine glass in front of Gina before placing another before Lee. He grinned. "From what I remember, you would drink it by the bucket."

She glanced at him, then sipped deeply. "I had my reasons."

Doug's hand tightened around his glass. "So, Lee, how funny is this, running into you here?"

"Very funny," said Gina, dryly. "Practically a coincidence."

"More on your end than mine, I should think." He flashed a badge from his pocket. "Shareholders' meeting for Smythe Kleeg Bachman. It runs the weekend, but I'm not staying past tomorrow morning's Synthopax presentation. All these doctors give me the jumps."

"Lee's family are major stockholders," Gina supplied. "His mother's a Kleeg."

"Ah," said Doug, sipping. "The family business. I suppose you spend a lot of time in Center City, then."

"At their headquarters?" Lee swirled his wine and gave his black-rimmed glasses an adjust. "Mom and my brother, Darrin, do have seats on the board, but I prefer the life of the idle rich." He glanced to Gina. "That's why I'm in politics, eh, sweets?"

Gina eyed him coolly. "You do slay me, Lee."

"Because you know I'm joking. Seriously, though, great buzz about your boy. They say he's a cinch. Especially if he agrees to meet with Milton Tate. That'll line the conservatives up behind him like ducklings."

Gina's face pinched. "He'd never do that."

Even Doug knew who he was. "You mean the guy who heads that victims' rights group?"

Gina shook her head. "Yeah, who fought Jack every step of the way on the DNA bill. Who stalked his office and called him a murderer more than once. Believe me, if

there was to be any meeting with Tate, I'd be arranging it. And that's not going to happen any time soon."

Lee arched a brow. "Have you been locked in a closet? Because let me tell you, it's been the buzz all day. He's going to show his solidarity with Jack by standing on the podium with him Sunday."

"That's impossible." Like instinct, Gina went for her purse and the ever-present BlackBerry inside. But both were somewhere upstairs, her phone switched to vibrate, probably wedged between cushions. Doug could see the panic spreading across her face. She looked to him then to Lee, sliding off the stool. "I need to go."

Lee stood up. "I think you'd better." He turned to Doug, his hand extended. "Great to see you again, Lieutenant. Take care of our girl, now."

Doug closed his hand over the man's, resisting the urge to crush it. "Senator."

"Hurry, Doug," Gina urged, halfway out the bar.

"Damn, damn, damn," she muttered, frantically pushing the elevator button. "He's probably been trying to get me all afternoon."

As they stepped inside Doug said, "You haven't exactly been incommunicado. You haven't talked to him once?"

The door shut and she smiled, shooting him a sideways glance. "With your cock inside me it's hard to breathe, let alone have a conversation. You must admit it's been my companion for a major portion of the day."

Doug cleared his throat, shifting his hip slightly as he slipped his hands into his pockets. "You complaining?"

"Hardly. Yet it does seem very strange Lee would know about Tate."

"Not to mention being in Rittenhouse Square this time of night when the Convention Center's halfway across town. I mean he does live in Jersey, right? Being a state senator and all?"

"Not twenty minutes away. A real big house in Marlton." She blushed slightly. "The last I heard, I mean."

Son of a bitch. She knows him well, Doug thought, the idea sending a nauseating rush through his gut. He had figured it from the moment he'd seen them together at the fundraiser, but he chose to ignore it. He looked to her, struggling to keep his voice impassive. "He was your lover, wasn't he?"

Gina gasped, her hand flying to her breast. The elevator opened and she bolted into the hall. Doug grabbed her arm halfway down and opening the door, shoved her inside.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"Are you crazy? And risk seeing you like this? *I'd* have to be nuts to do that."

"I've got nothing to do with it. Someone's trying to kill you. Old lovers are always the first suspects."

She threw up her hands. "Oh, well, that makes sense. Because if that's true, you should top the list."

"Don't push me, sweetheart," he said, looming over her. "Remember, I'm the one trying to help you."

She rushed her hands through her hair. "And killing me in the process."

He grabbed her by the shoulders. "If I wanted to kill you, I could've done it a long time ago. God knows I had a reason."

"And your reasons were always so much more important than mine. Doug the omnipotent. Doug the all-knowing." She shrugged him loose, heading for the end table and her purse. "Well, maybe there's a few things you don't need to know about me. Maybe it's better that way."

He could feel the blood boiling in his veins. "If you want me to help you, I need to know everything."

She reached into her purse, pulled out her BlackBerry. "I've already told you all you need to know."

He came up behind her. "Just saying that tells me you're hiding something."

"Yeah, I want to die. You've got it." She moved away, scrolling. "Now, I just so

happen to have a life that doesn't include you, Douglas, so why don't you go back to your investigation while I get on with mine or you won't have anything to—"

He grabbed the phone and hurled it into the room. "You little bitch."

"Animal!" She slapped at him and he latched hold of her wrists, forcing her back on the sofa.

"Don't fuck with me, Gina, I'm warning you."

"Go to hell!" she cried, struggling under him.

"Yeah?" He gave her a shake. "Tell me what you know or I swear to God I'll walk right out of here."

She stared at him, incensed. "Why does that not surprise me? You'd rather have me die than ever imagine me with anyone else. Get this through your head, Doug: I had a life before you *and* after you and I have one now. You can't crawl inside me and watch me every second of the day. There will always be parts of me you'll never understand. My God, what do you want from me?"

Some seal inside him blew and before he could think he was clawing at her, scrabbling her dress to her waist as he fumbled with his belt and his zipper and he was driving himself in, pressing her to the sofa, his cock harder than he'd ever felt it, his mouth falling to hers to squelch the curses flying from her mouth like richly carved pearls. He fucked her with passion and intensity, a primal urge egging him on he was helpless to ignore. Gina writhed beneath him, her hips bucking as he pushed into her, biting his tongue as he shoved it ceaselessly inside, muffled curses still streaming up her throat. After a minute she abruptly stopped, her breath turning to gasps, and it was then he knew she was coming. He released her mouth, her neck arching into the cushions as she shivered and moaned against him and then he was coming too, his mind blanking as he emptied himself into her, draining himself, spending everything, a pleasure so deeply feral his groin ached. When it finally ended he slumped against her, more tired than he ever imagined. A moment later, he felt her arms around him, her breath warm against his neck.

She kissed him. “We have a lot of angry sex, don’t we?”

He closed his eyes. “I’m a fucking bastard, I know it. I wouldn’t blame you if you kicked me right in balls.”

He could feel her laughing. “Oh honey, they’re my balls as much as yours, and that’s the last thing I’d do to anything with that much entertainment value.”

He eased up, looking at her. “Is that all I am to you? Entertainment?”

“No,” she said softly, gliding a finger down his cheek. “Of course not. To me, you’re everything.”

Then he kissed her, softly and thoroughly, gathering her up in his arms to set her upright on the sofa. “You okay, baby?”

“Aces, flatfoot.” She yanked his tie. “C’mere.” She kissed him quick, ruffling his hair. “But I think we’re going to have to ease up on the hot sex for an hour or two.” She squirmed. “My nether region is starting to feel a bit ragged.”

“Lightweight.” He kissed her back, pulling her to her feet. “Let’s go. I’ve got just the thing.”

A little while later, they were both sitting suds-deep in the Jacuzzi, Doug’s arms flung atop the sides, Gina at the opposite end scrolling through her BlackBerry. “This is really odd. There’s only one message from Jack, telling me Ted Parks has the list from the fundraiser last night.”

“Yeah, I know. He also called the squad.”

“He did? Don’t you think that’s kind of weird?”

He snorted. “I think all your friends are weird, but who am I to say?”

She snaked her foot between his legs and gave his package a nudge. “Come on, Doug. Why would he think I’m with you?”

“Why would he think you wouldn’t be?”

“Look, no one knows about the death threats outside of you, your captain, Jack and Roark. And no one knows we’re...” She rolled her eyes, smiling. “An *item*, besides you and me. So how would he know to call the squad?”

“Because someone told him. Or he knows our history.” He looked at her directly.
“You tell me.”

“I have nothing to say. And that’s the truth.”

“We’re going there, first thing. Should’ve gone this afternoon.”

“So we kind of got sidetracked. But I don’t regret it a bit.” She set the BlackBerry to the top of toilet. “At least I haven’t heard from ‘bigfan’ today. That’s a relief.” She slid herself over to his side, slumping against him with a sigh. “Oh, Doug, this was such a good idea. See this steam? It’s not entirely coming off the water.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Never underestimate the rejuvenating power of a good soak, doll. You’ll be all right in the morning.”

She shifted to look up at him. “Does that mean tonight...?”

“Sleep,” he said, laying her head back against his chest. “Blissful, restful sleep.”

She sighed again, closing her eyes.

They got out before the water turned cold, drying each other with thick terry towels. He watched her as she bent into the sink to brush her teeth, her breasts leaning with her, her beautiful ass arched, wanting to sink himself into her so badly he had to look away. But when it was his turn she was behind him, those same breasts rubbing up against him as she hugged his back, watching him shave and brush and floss, kissing him between his shoulder blades..

Gina watched Doug as he relieved himself. “Men are so lucky,” she said. “All you have to do is aim. Now, women? Imagine having to struggle out of pantyhose. And all those cold toilet seats. Even worse when you go to a public bathroom and the toilet paper’s empty.”

He flushed. “Yeah, but the sex is easier. No run-off. And no evidence bulging out your pants. You don’t even have to touch your pussy to get off.”

Gina scowled at him. “Do too. Even when I—” She blushed furiously.

“Masturbate? Oh, don’t sweat it, doll. Everyone does.”

“Whatever. But that’s not what I mean. I mean you’d still have to touch my pussy

to get me off.”

One brow shot up. “No, I wouldn’t. I’ll prove it to you.” He swept her off to the other room and pulling back the covers, set her down on the bed.

She snuggled into it, throwing her arms over her head. “Proceed, Dr. Welland.”

“Then pay attention.” He leaned up on his elbow. “The whole body’s an erogenous zone. You just have to treat it like one. Remember when you were sucking my toes?”

She grinned. “Oh, yeah. Did you like it?”

His groin twinged at the thought. “If I hadn’t stopped you, I would’ve made a mess of myself. But on a woman, there are more obvious spots.”

“My breasts. Obviously.”

He leaned into her, his mouth at her ear. “Oh hell, one example is worth a thousand explanations.”

Gina flinched when Doug’s tongue found her ear, deftly lacing into each crevice, dipping into the canal, gently tugging at her lobe. From there, he traced his tongue down her neck, nipping and planting soft kisses, all the way down to the curve of her breasts. She moaned softly, arms entwined over her head. He dipped lower, curving his trace into her soft, smooth armpits. She flinched, this spot obviously virgin, so he exploited it, huffing softly against the sensitive skin until she moaned, kissing a trail to her breasts again.

“Is it working so far?” he said softly. She groaned a response. He then moved onto her nipple, sucking and tugging and branding her anew, going from one breast to another until she fairly glided beneath him, her hands scrubbing into his hair as he kissed and licked around the heavy underside of her breast. From there, his hands took over, kneading and squeezing, while he took her mouth with his, kissing her deeply and with a flourish that left him just as breathless as she.

“Touch me,” she moaned. “Just once. *Please.*”

“Not part of the deal, doll,” he said, kissing her again, her leg arching against his back. “And definitely not necessary.”

“Please,” she begged. “I don’t want you to fuck me, but I can’t stand it.”

“You won’t have to much longer. Now pay attention.”

He kissed her once more, then again began his trek down her body – ears, neck, armpits, breasts, licking, sucking, branding, Gina writhing against the sheet like gliding on oil, moaning softly, her hands on his shoulders, urging her lower.

“Please, Doug, please!” She groaned. “I don’t care, I just want you to—”

He kissed one hip, her belly, the other hip, then back. Then reaching up, he pinched a nipple between his fingers and squeezed, trailing across her belly to bring his tongue deep into her navel. Where he flicked. And flicked and flicked and flicked.

Her mouth opened, her neck arching into the pillow, her hips shivering as violently as he’d ever seen before she went limp, her eyes falling shut. “Jesus...” she breathed.

Doug leaned up on his arm. “Didn’t I tell you? No pussy involved at all. It’s all in the brain, really. You see?”

She turned to her side, snoring.

Doug sighed, looking down. His cock lay against his thigh like a steel pipe. Sometimes his randy mojo was a real pain in the ass.

He deadbolted the door and shut off the lights, sliding his Glock underneath his pillow. Then he hunkered down and, pulling Gina against him, fell immediately asleep.

* * * *

Sometime in the middle of the night he awoke to an intense pressure between his legs, pushing, pulling, until he realized it was his cock, yanking his whole body forward. He rolled onto his back and the pressure grew more intense, the muscles of his ass tightening. His eyes flew open and he saw Gina through the shadows. It wasn’t a second later he exploded into her mouth, Gina sucking and licking until she pumped him dry. When she was through, she settled against his side.

“No pussy involved at all,” she said, promptly falling back asleep.

* * * *

“Where you going?” Gina said sleepily, grabbing his pillow, her hair spilling

about her own.

Doug leaned down and kissed her temple. “Just sleep,” he said, smoothing her hair. She was so beautiful he winced. “I won’t be long.”

“Mmm...” she murmured, drifting off.

A few minutes later he was out on the street, crossing Rittenhouse Square. The benches held a few early birds, dog-walkers here and there, the coffee shops already open and steady with traffic. But he needed to walk. And keep walking as long as he could to work it out of him. He knew it was selfish, because he really shouldn’t be leaving her alone. And if something did happen to her while he was stupidly tending to his own corrupted ego, he’d simply put his service pistol to his head and pull the trigger. But he couldn’t help it. He needed air and motion like a horse needed to run. He needed it badly and he needed it now.

So he walked and walked, the store windows decorated with black and orange and witches, the potted geraniums soon giving way to poinsettias and eventually winter cabbages. Why he knew this he couldn’t fathom, beyond it was one of those constants in modern life that stuck with you, like knowing your e-mail addresses, PINs and what month to get your car registration renewed. But the things much older than that, as in the inner workings and foibles of the human heart, those completely baffled him. Those he just couldn’t figure.

He loved her. God in heaven, he loved her. He always had, he always would, as sure of it as the sun climbing over skyline. But did she love him? She’d never said so. He turned the corner, easing around a man sleeping over a steam grate. The only time she ever mentioned love was to say she *didn’t* love him, sending him to a place he never wanted to go to again. So what now?

He stopped at a light, the sparse traffic mostly taxis and buses and not a car in sight. He stamped his foot, impatient. He always thought it stupid to wait at a light when nothing was coming, but then there was always the chance a car would come out of the blue and hit him broadside. And when he stepped off the curb, sure enough, a taxi

careened around the corner. He jumped back to the sidewalk, and found his answer.

He didn't care.

He didn't care if she didn't love him. He didn't care if today and tomorrow were all the time they had in the world. All he cared about was she had come back. She had taken the last two and a half years and folded the empty space to link them back together, as good as uninterrupted. She had given him – he was giving *her* – a second chance. How many people got that? And if she left tomorrow, if she took her suitcase and his heart with her back to Washington, he also knew something else: he would survive. He would survive because he had lived to try again, and that was the best he could hope for in this out-of-control world.

Suddenly, he felt light. He looked across the street and there was a store just turning the lights on, women's clothing, he could see. He looked up and the stoplight changed. *Lights, lights, lights*. He trotted across, smiling, weightless, ethereal, pick up a thesaurus and point. He went to their door; it was locked. There was a woman behind the counter, waving him off, pointing to her watch. "We open at nine, sorry!"

Doug folded his hands in supplication. "Oh, please! Today's our anniversary, and I didn't get my wife a thing! I can't go home until I do. Please!"

But the look on her face told him she was wary. Why should she open the door to a complete stranger, blathering about anniversaries at barely eight o'clock on a Saturday morning? He reached into his pocket. "Look," he said, pressing his shield up against the glass, "I'm a Camden police officer. I'll make it worth your while. I swear." Then he flashed his lethal Welland smile, a bit of a trump card known to leave more than a few women fairly helpless. She smiled back, and opened the door.

Ten minutes later he was on the street, three hundred dollars lighter, clutching two bags. Back at the hotel he picked up the house phone and ordered a full breakfast for two. And coffee, lots and lots of coffee. A minute later he was back at the room, shoving the key card in the door.

When he walked in, the room was empty.

“Gina!” he screamed.

She poked her head from the bathroom. “Jesus, Doug, what?”

He dropped the bags, rushing to her. He didn’t think. He couldn’t think. He just took her in his arms and crushed her against him, kissing her over and over again.

Gina laughed, holding her arms out, her hands white with lotion. Finally she just gave up and swiped them down her hotel-supplied robe, wrapping her arms around him. “Wow, that’s some welcome. I can’t imagine what’d happen if you left me for a full hour.”

He held her out. “It’s just that – you were – and I – oh, hell.” He kissed her again.

“I’m all right. Doug. Doug!” She pushed him back, holding him by the shoulders. “Doug, sweetie, please.” She pressed his hand to her cheek, and whispered, “I’m all right. Really I am.” She kissed his palm. “See?”

He exhaled, pulling her to him. He still wasn’t sure if she was all right or not. But he was, at least for the duration.

* * * *

Gina turned around, checking the slitted skirt in the mirror. “This looks great!” She turned back, cocking a hip. “Who would’ve thought? My little Doug, my own metrosexual fashion dude.”

He spread his legs, leaning back in the chair. “I had some help.”

“Now don’t be modest,” she said, sliding into his lap. She adjusted the cashmere sweater on her shoulder. “I love the panties, too. So I’m back to wearing them?”

He snorted, dropping a hand to her knee. “Well, they looked—”

“Sexy?” she finished. “That’s okay. It’s always a lot of fun getting them off.” Her BlackBerry chimed. She leaned over the end table and grabbed it “That’s Jack, finally.” She switched it to speaker. “Jack! It’s about time. I’ve been calling you all morning.”

“Now you know how I felt yesterday,” he said without preamble.

“That’s my fault,” Doug said. “We were following a few leads. Someone broke into Gina’s hotel room yesterday. We had to check her out.”

“Damn. I’m sorry, G. Where you at now?”

Doug winced. He hated that nickname. He hated that she had a nickname he didn’t give her. “Why? Can’t you—”

“We’re at the Radisson in Philly,” Gina interjected, squeezing his knee. “We came to check out that e-mail address. But I’ll be staying at Doug’s place in Camden.”

“In Camden?” He cleared his throat. “Of course. At Doug’s place. I’m sure you’ll be perfectly safe.”

Doug shifted beneath her, exhaling heavily. Gina swiped her hand under his chin and said, “Jack, why didn’t you tell me about Milton Tate?”

Silence for a moment. “That’s far from finalized.”

“It sure as hell is! Especially since I don’t know about it.”

He laughed humorlessly. “Gina, you’ve been a little preoccupied these days. I didn’t want to burden you with it.”

“Jack, burden me! I’m your chief of staff! I’m *supposed* to be your beast of burden. I’m supposed to know things before you do. How does it look when I have to hear from Lee Roland last night—”

“Wait a minute. You saw Lee last night? He’s supposed to be in Washington at a Party strategy session.”

“You don’t say,” said Doug, looking at Gina. “How do you know this?”

“Because he’s on the vetting committee for my seat. As soon as I announce I’m running for governor, I want to pull my replacement up on the podium next to me. He’s supposed to be down in D. C. finalizing it for me for Sunday.”

Gina stood up, pacing. “Now you’ve got me baffled, Jack. We decided on Jerry Szabo, the mayor of Florence Township, remember?”

He sighed. “There’s been a change of plans.”

“Oh, really? Did you plan on telling me?”

Another pause. “Ted Parks.”

“*Ted Parks!*” Her face went crimson. Doug jumped from the chair. “Are you kidding? I’ve been working for months with Szabo. This’ll make me look like a fool!”

“Gina, I’m not having this conversation over the phone. Be at my office in an hour.” He hung up.

She was livid, but more than that, Doug realized. She was scared.

“Doug, why is he shutting me out?”

“I don’t know,” he said softly.

The BlackBerry dinged for a text. She looked at it, going white. “Oh, God.”

Doug grabbed it from her: *Your big fan won’t have a idol too much longer.* He scrolled to the source. PRIVATE CALLER. “Now he’s texting. And it’s blocked.”

Gina crumpled to the chair, her face in her hands.

Chapter Eleven

DISTRICT OFFICE, U.S. REPRESENTATIVE JOHN C. FALCO – RIVERBORO

SATURDAY 31 OCTOBER

Gina pressed her knuckles to the desk. “Why are you shutting me out, Jack?”

He sighed, coming around to her. “I’m not shutting you out, Gina. It’s just that things are happening very quickly.”

“Without me, it appears. Apparently, you must be dissatisfied with my work.”

He squeezed her hand. “Nothing could be further from the truth. I’ve never met anyone more dedicated. You’re the best there is, and I mean that.”

She glanced to Doug on the sofa. She had his full attention. “Then why?”

“Gina.” He scrubbed his hand over his face, half-sitting on his desk.

“Would you like me to leave?” Doug said.

Jack looked to him, as if suddenly realizing he was there. “No. As a matter of fact, I’m glad you’re here. I think you should be.”

“For what?” Gina said, getting impatient.

Jack regarded her, crossing his arms. “Gina, I don’t have to tell you I’m in this for the long haul. I’d like to go as far as I can, all the way to the top if I can get there.”

“I want to be right there with you, you know that.”

“You told me as much. But do you believe it?”

She looked at him, incredulous. “Of course I do. Why wouldn’t I? Do you think I take any of this lightly? Do you think I don’t give you one hundred and ten percent?”

“Of course you do. That’s your problem, Gina. You squeeze everyone and everything out until you get what you want. You can be ruthlessly efficient, more than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

“What’s wrong with that? Because if I were a man—”

“Stop right there,” said Jack, sliding from the desk. “Do *not* play the gender card with me. You above anyone else should know that doesn’t matter. What I’m talking about

is what does, and Gina? You just don't get it anymore. I don't know if you ever did."

"Then what are you saying?"

"Simply this." He looked away for a moment, returning with an intensity Gina had never seen before. "To succeed in this business, because politics *is* a business, don't fool yourself. You have to let it absorb you. Nothing else can matter, not even your family, because they just end up as filler in the background of your campaign poster. Everyone you love, anyone you're close to, has to take on the same persona. There's no independence in politics, there's only lining up behind the party line, Democratic or Republican, liberal or conservative, from ward leaders right up to the top. Are you prepared to live like that?"

He palmed his chest. "For me? It doesn't matter. I have no pretty family to stand alongside me, no beaming wife to hold my Bible while I'm sworn in, but that's okay. Why would you ever want to drag someone you love into this kind of life? And I love you, Gina." He looked to Doug. "Don't worry, not that way. In a way I would love a family if I had one. Enough to tell you flat-out this is no life for you anymore."

"You have no right to say that," she said evenly.

He nodded. "True. But somebody should. Because you have too much life in you to give it up for me or the party, not when you can be so much more effective out there in the real world, getting your hands dirty instead of dirtying someone else's. If this whole stalker episode has proved anything, it's what's important and what isn't." He laughed harshly. "I should've never coaxed you out of lobbying. You were one of the good ones, for a cause you believed in. To get where I want, I'm going to have to be an egomaniac surrounded by mercenaries. And I don't think you want to go there. Not now."

She met his gaze directly. "Are you firing me?"

"Of course not. That's one decision you'll have to make on your own." He turned to Doug. "The only thing that's important now is getting this maniac out of the way."

Doug stood. "We're going to get that list from Ted Parks right now."

"That's what I figured. But he's not at his office, if that's where you're headed. I

left a message on his cell telling him to call you right away.”

“He called my captain the other day, trying to find me. Any idea how he knew to do that?”

“I told him to,” said Jack. “He’s organizing the rally, and even though we’re trying to keep Gina’s situation out of the public eye, obviously there’s a leak. Having this maniac think the police are somewhat involved couldn’t hurt. Ted just thinks we want it for general security reasons. Anyway.” He stood, extending his hand. “Thanks, Lieutenant. It’s a godsend on many levels you’re here. I mean that sincerely.”

Doug shook it heartily. “You’re welcome.”

Jack looked to Gina. “And for your information, G, nothing’s finalized about meeting with Tate. All I’ve done is left the door open. As far as who’s going to take over my seat, both Szabo and Ted will be at the rally, as Ted hasn’t passed the vetting committee yet. And don’t underestimate Lee. He’s been known to slip back into the playboy life from time to time, but he gets the job done.”

Gina snorted. “Yeah, well, we’ll see.”

He placed his hand on her arm. “Look, *I* don’t even know who’s going to replace me until I actually call them up on the platform tomorrow. Just be there at noon. ”

They left.

Gina turned into the window as they pulled out of the parking lot. “My career is over.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “Maybe it’s just beginning.”

“Oh Doug, I’m too jaded for aphorisms. Try another tack.”

“Then how about this. Anywhere you want to go, I’ll be right there with you. Does that help?”

“More than you can imagine,” she said, nuzzling his hand, knowing full well it only made the guilt that much deeper.

* * * *

SERIOUS JOE COFFEE BISTRO – RIVERBORO

“He said he’d be right over.” Gina slipped the BlackBerry into her purse. “Jeez, why all the drama? Why didn’t he just e-mail me the list two days ago?”

“He lives just a couple of streets down,” said Roark, setting two mugs of coffee and a plate of fruit to the table. “His wife and mine are pretty thick.”

Doug slanted him a look. “How is Pam? Still pissed at me?”

Roark smiled, sliding the tray under his muscled arm. “Not anymore,” he said, glancing at Gina. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“What was that all about?” Gina said.

Doug slid a mug to him, poking the fruit with a fork. “I showed up at his house in the middle of the night a few days ago. Scared the crap out of his wife.”

“Isn’t his wife that big writer, what’s her name? Pamela Flynn? She’s pregnant, right? With twins?”

“Triplets,” he said, sipping as he looked out the window.

Gina felt a little sick. Sick for Doug, sick for herself. How painful was it for him to see his best friend’s wife pregnant. She touched his arm. “I’m sorry.”

He looked at her sharply. “What for?”

“For it not being me instead of her.”

He turned back to the window. “Forget about it.”

“How can I? It’s the two-ton elephant in the room.”

“Gina, we can beat it to death, or we can forget about it, but I’m not going to let it sit between us anymore. I can’t. Because the fact that you’re here says more about what we mean to each other now than what we meant in the past. You do want to be here, don’t you?”

She felt the knife twist in her heart. “Oh God, you know I do.”

“Well, there it is. That’s the best I can hope for, isn’t it?”

This was why people meet in public places to discuss the things too close to the heart, she thought. To reveal them privately was unbearable. “I want to give you so much more, Doug. Truly I do.”

He looked to her, impassive. “Do you?”

A bell tinkled over the door. A tall, lanky man walked in, dressed in running clothes. He smiled cheerfully. “Gina! So good to see you.”

Her smile was cordial. “Ted. We’ve been waiting for you. Have a seat.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” He twisted the chair around, sitting backwards. “Lieutenant Welland.”

Doug nodded. “I believe you have something for Gina?”

“Right.” He reached into her pocket. “Everyone from U.S. Senator Lautenberg right on down to the guy who cleans the grease trap. No one got in or out of there without getting on this list. Including me.” He leaned into Gina, the printout between his fingers. “Now, why is it you need that? Should I be scared?”

“Only if you have something to hide,” she said, snatching it from him. “Do you?”

“Ha!” he laughed. “I’m an open book. At least the vetters seem to think so. Nothing but good news so far.”

“How wonderful for you,” Gina said, stuffing the papers into her purse. “You’ll love Washington. I do.”

“Past tense, Gina. You *did*, if Jack goes to Trenton. But it doesn’t have to be that way, you know. If I win, you can keep your job and work for me.”

Gina’s eyes flared. “I’m Jack’s chief of staff. Where he goes, I go.”

He threw out his hands, standing up. “Just throwing the offer out there. Well, got to run, literally. See you tomorrow.”

Doug eyed him as he ran down the street. “Presumptuous little bastard, isn’t he?”

Gina watched him until he turned the corner. “The thing is, he’s too used to winning. He always gets what he wants.”

“Like you?” said Doug, nibbling on a strawberry.

Her mouth crooked. “Like me. Now, can we get out of here?”

HENRY STREET – CAMDEN, NJ

“I’m so tired,” Gina said, leaning against Doug’s shoulder as he shut off the car. “Do we have to go anywhere?”

“Nowhere except up to my room. How does that sound to you?”

“Like heaven,” she said, yawning expansively. “I’m just going to strip off these beautiful clothes you bought me and crawl right into your big, bad bed. Would you like to come with me?”

“Over and over again, doll,” he said, grabbing her hand. “Let’s go, I’m getting horny just thinking about it.”

Miss Ella appeared to be out, which was a good thing. As nice as she seemed, Gina couldn’t help feeling slightly shady parading past Doug’s parental figure, like he should somehow be sneaking her in the back entrance. But then, hadn’t all her lovers been covert, since she was always afraid of making the wrong impression, of losing her impartiality? Comparatively, it was so much easier to be with Doug. He was so out of her workaday sphere, she could be herself. That is, as much as she allowed herself to be.

“Take a load off,” he said once they reached his flat. He tossed his keys to the table and went to the kitchen. Would you like something to drink?”

“No, nothing,” she said, already slipping out of her sweater. By the time Doug returned, beer in hand, she was standing naked next to the bed.

“Hi,” she said, kicking off her shoes. “Or would you like me to leave them on?”

His gaze took a leisurely stroll up and down her body. “You’re gorgeous, you know? Like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

She turned to her side, crooking her finger. “Come here.”

He took a long pull on the beer, then set it to the night table. “I’m here.”

“So you are.” Gina reached up and slipped her hands inside his jacket to slide it off, his tie following. He shrugged out of his holster, locking his pistol into a gun safe in the night table. Then he kicked off his shoes and stripped off the rest of his clothes until

he was as naked as she. All at once, Gina held her breath.

Could a single human being really possess all that is physically perfect? Or did love overshadow every imperfection? It was an postulate that could be argued ad infinitum, but to Gina, the seeing was hard to dismiss. As he stood there in the bright afternoon light, she took in his spiky blond hair, his Nordic features, his broad shoulders and arms thick with muscles, his perfect pecs, strong back, ridged abs and that ass – good Lord! what an ass. She felt a bit giddy – *damn, even his toes were perfect*. In fact, he was quite simply the finest male specimen she'd ever seen.

And he loved her. *My God*. She looked up at him.

“You’re staring at me,” he said.

“I am. Because you’re gorgeous, too. The most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen.”

A bloom spread over his face. “Gorgeous is for chicks, doll.”

“Not manly men? Well, how about ripped? Smokin’? *Hot?*”

Red seeped down to his chest. “I’m nothing special.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. Gina wrapped her arms around his waist. “Isn’t it always the special ones who say that?” She pushed up on her toes and kissed him.

He gathered her up in his arms and took her to the big, iron bed, kissing her mouth, her neck, her breasts, trailing down her belly to between her legs, where he feasted on her until her breath came in gasps and her groans turned to sighs. When she rolled over, he put a pillow under her belly and made love to her bottom, licking every crevice and curve, biting and sucking until he branded her as his own. Then, tilting her a bit, he held her legs together with his as he sunk his cock deep into her pussy. She raised her body up and latched onto the iron bar, her heavy breasts slapping against her chest with each thrust, her head thrown back as he sucked and nuzzled her neck, the friction of the sheet against her pussy sending her spiraling over the edge again. It launched him as well, his come filling her, spilling out of her. When they stilled, she curled against him and they slept.

It was more of the same as the afternoon gave way to evening, sleeping and

fucking at intervals. Once, they got up and took a shower, shared a bottle of seltzer, cold chicken, biscuits and an apple, laughing hysterically about something nonsensical. A little while after, he was awakened by her mouth on him. When she caught him watching her, she had them shift places, and with her on the bottom and him on the top, she squirted her chest with thick globs of lotion. Holding the heavy mounds together, he slipped his cock in between and fucked her breasts, shooting his come into her waiting mouth. After nightfall, she woke up to see him standing by the window, looking out over the city, the Benjamin Franklin Bridge in the distance lighting the way to Philadelphia.

She went to the window and put her hand to the glass; it was cold against her palm, as cold as the jelly he was slathering between her buttocks, in contrast to the warmth of his cock when he slipped it into her hole. She braced her hands against either side of the window and before the city and the night he eased in and out, in and out, until he spent himself into her, until she cried out his name with her release. He carried her back to the bed, and they cleansed each other with soft soapy cloths and kisses before he fell asleep on her thigh, her fingers tangled in his hair.

When the moon rose she felt his tongue on her, licking, flicking, and she curved herself around until she was on top of him, his cock against her lips. From there she traced the soft side of his underbelly, the curious flatness of skin between his anus and scrotum, so different from her own. She took his balls into her mouth and sucked and pulled until his breath heightened, gliding her tongue along the vein on his thick cock until her lips curved over his velvety crown, where she suckled, dipping the point of her tongue into the tiny hole before she raised her head and took him fully down her throat. Raised up and down, up and down, up and down until his own tongue went rampant against her and she was coming and so was he, tiny sparkles appearing before her eyes as her groin burst with pleasure, her mouth flooding with salt and sweet and joy. She swallowed, then twisted around to kiss him, her taste in his mouth, his own in hers, her heart atop his, beating an irregular cadence until one slowed and one caught up, melding into a rhythm of one.

He held her face between his hands and whispered, "I love you, I always will." Not waiting for an answer, he tucked her against him. Then, with his hand on her hip, his breath warm against her neck, he fell asleep, deeply and soundly.

* * * *

SUNDAY 1 NOVEMBER

Gina awoke to the scent of bacon, toasting bread and coffee. "Oooh," she groaned, rolling over, "I *am* in heaven."

Doug came out of the kitchen, naked to the waist, a spatula in his hand. "Morning, doll," he said, kissing her forehead. "Get up, get up. I'm cooking a pound of bacon, and not a slice is safe. I'm hungry enough to eat a whole hog."

"Fancy that," she said, stretching. She grabbed his shirt from the floor and buttoned it over her. When she went into the kitchen, he was sliding eggs onto a plate.

His eyes hooded. "Damn, you look great in my clothes. Come here." He kissed her thoroughly. "Now make yourself useful and take these out to the table." A few more trips from the little kitchen and they were at the table, digging in.

"I don't think I've ever been hungrier," Gina said, eating her fifth piece of bacon. "And you know, I believe I'm getting used to you. I'm not even sore today."

He reached under the table and grabbed her knee. "You're growing a hide, woman. That's good."

She laughed. *Every breakfast should be like this.* Every breakfast should include a man as wonderful as Doug, with food as delectably fatty as bacon, eggs and rye bread smothered with butter, all wrapped up in the afterglow of a glorious night of lovemaking. *I could get used to this.* He smiled, her world lighting up anew.

"What time is it?" she said, biting into the last slice of bacon.

"Going on ten."

She dropped the slice to her plate. "I have to get in the shower!" When Doug rose, grinning wolfishly, she held him back with her hand. "You stay right there or we'll never get out of here."

He winced. “When you’re right, you’re right.” And sat back down.

Twenty minutes later she was out with a towel wrapped around her, her hair up in clips, hauling her suitcase atop the bed. She flipped it opened. “Somewhere in here I have some ‘Falco for Governor’ buttons we had made up.” She dug her fingers into the side pockets. “There’s going to be boxes and boxes of them at the rally, but I’d really like to show up with one—” She stopped cold.

“What’s that, doll?” Doug called from the kitchen.

She saw it peeking out from the corner of the pocket, one single word: *Mumsford*.

The newsprint had aged understandably; it was nearly three years old. Slowly, she drew it out until the whole article became clear, just a news clip, really, but looming as large as if it were printed on a billboard. *Mumsford Innocent of Drug Charge*.

Her spine iced over.

“Gina?”

She could sense, rather than see him beside her.

“Gina?” He grabbed her shoulders, turning to her toward him. “Gina, you’re fucking white! What the hell?”

“This was in my suitcase,” she said blankly, showing him.

“What?” He gave her a shake. “Gina, you’re freaking me out. What’s wrong?”

She looked into his eyes, eyes like liquid crystal, so blue she could swim away in them. Eyes that held so much love every time they caught hers a bit of her heart broke away. It was time. She couldn’t take it anymore. If the worst that could happen was that he left her, it couldn’t be any worse than this.

“Read this,” she said, handing him the article.

He looked at her strangely, but snatched it away, quickly taking it in. “”This is the case I testified at, where we first met. The crack kid who turned a new leaf.” He huffed. “Why is this freaking you out now?”

She sat on the bed, holding onto the footboard. “Because I don’t know how it got

there.”

“What?”

“I would never put it there. I never wanted to remember it.” She stared at her hands; the hands were the worst part, now that she recalled. She clenched her eyes, biting back the memory. But she had to remember. She had to tell him. There was no holding back now. Not anymore.

He was shaking her. “What the hell’s going on? Tell me what this means.”

All at once it became clear: *she* was being vetted. If she wanted him, if she deserved to have him, it could be nothing less than full transparency. She straightened her back, sitting up, and looked him dead in the eye.

“Doug, I have something to tell you.”

He stood back. “Okay.”

“You may not like me when I’m done. You may hate me, in fact, but I have to tell you. If I don’t, it’s over for the both of us.”

“Gina, what the—”

“Doug. *Please*.” When he threw up his hands, she knew she had his attention. He sat on the bed, a few inches away. “Promise me you won’t interrupt until I’m finished.”

He looked like he was going to say something but ended up with, “Yes.”

“Because while I’m telling you this, keep in mind this one thing. This thing I never told you before. I love you.”

“*Gina*.”

“I do, as intensely and deeply as you have the misfortune of loving me. Maybe more so, because I don’t deserve you.” He reached for her but she moved away. “Please don’t touch me. I don’t think I could bear it.” She swiped her eyes. “Are you with me?”

His eyes were liquid and deep, deep blue. “Yes.”

“Good.” She gripped the iron bars, struggling to keep her voice steady. “Now. Do you remember that last day of the trial? When we were all called into the district attorney’s office?”

“Yes. Right before the prosecution rested.”

“Well, it would have gone on, except for...”

Funny how clear it comes back to you, the things you try to suppress. But you can't really, because it always revisits you, and it's even worse the second time around. I'd been at the top of my game, the girl who never lost a trial, with so many offers, for so many different avenues, I could have closed my eyes and pointed and still come up gold. So when I walked into the district attorney's office, I was walking on a cloud, so high above the rest of them I couldn't even see them anymore.

“Face it, Ted, you don't have a thing. Besides, the kid's straight now. A model of rehabilitation. He's got a wife, a kid and mortgage. And a boss who's solidly behind him.”

Ted Parks was as skinny then as he is now. Lanky, some call it, but I wouldn't. I liked my men with muscles. Gobs of them. “Gentlemen?” He turned to the three lurking like vultures. “I'd like to have a word with Ms. Bardone. Do you mind?”

The assistant DAs all looked at each other, nattering like a pack of crows. “Sure, Ted,” one of the finally said. “Gina.” Nodding to me as they went out the door.

I turned to him. Oh Lordy, was this gonna be good. One lift of my Patent d'Orsays and I'd squash him like a bug.

He sat on the edge of his desk, tossing a folder to the table. “See this? Guess what it is.”

“I haven't the faintest.”

He leaned forward. “That's your boy's death knell.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, please.”

He smiled. An oily little curve of the mouth that belied the definition. “That is one joint of Colombian Gold taken from his ashtray by the cop who stopped him for speeding on 295 last week.”

“What? You must be joking.”

“Hardly. And you know what this means. Three strikes and he's out. Mandatory

five-year sentence. And worst of worst – your perfect record goes down the drain.”

“You wouldn’t.”

The smile came back. “Why not?”

A sucker punch, that’s what it was. A below-the-belt, a cheap shot. But worse than that, it was gratuitously heartless, for no other purpose but to show her he could..

I stared at him, horrified. “You can’t.”

He laughed. “I will. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

He crossed his arms, leaning back. “Unless you fuck me.”

“What?” Had he really said that? It wasn’t possible.

“You heard me.”

I turned away. “You go to hell.”

In a second he was on me, backing me into a table. “Oh Gina, what the hell do you care? It’s just a fuck. Just a slice of me inside a slit of you, moving back and forth so a young man could go home to his wife and kids. Remain a productive member of society. Pay his taxes.”

“You bastard. You’ll lose your license for this. I’ll report you to the Bar.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Jesus Christ, Gina – who’d believe you? With all those wins? Who doesn’t believe you’re fucking your way through them? Almost everyone out there already think you’ve got half of the district attorneys up your cunt anyway.”

“That’s a lie!”

“Oh really? Did you see those men who just left? If you look out the door, they’re already packing up.”

“I never sold out, ever. I won every case on their merits alone.”

“And now you’ll lose and send a man to jail. All because you wouldn’t lift your skirt for one lousy fuck you’d forget about a minute after I’m out of you.”

“Then why even bother? Why do you want me?”

He leaned over me, arching me back. "Because when I'm in a roomful of those lying bastards out there, when each and every one of them are saying what it was like to fuck you, I'll be the only one to really know not only what it was like, but also how it would've felt to make you lose."

I could barely say it. "You're a monster."

"Who's the monster? The man who wants to fuck you, or the woman who sends a struggling man to jail for five years?" He pushed the file to me. "Your choice."

I stared at it, my heart pounding out my chest. It was such a simple thing, really: a fuck for freedom. At least, that's what I told myself. In the end, it was even simpler than that. As I stood there, my hands braced on the table, my back to him, I didn't even have to give him my answer. I didn't even have to move. All I had to do is stand there, let him lift my skirt and pull my panties down, and a moment later, he was leaning me into the table and sinking in, his hands aside me, white hands, hands that had never pushed anything harder than a pen, and less than a minute later he grunted and it was over. Three hours later, both me and Lucas Mumsford were walking out the courthouse.

"And an hour after that, you were making love to me." For the first time in ten minutes she looked at him; his expression was blank. *"You took away a bit of dirtiness every time you kissed me," she said. "I think I fell in love with you that very day. You were my knight in shining armor. You were going to make me clean again.*

"That's why I couldn't have the baby, Doug. I couldn't think of it. I know it's a terrible thing to say, because a little innocent baby can't help it, but I just didn't know! I didn't know if it was yours or his, and it'll shame me to the day I die, but I just couldn't do it. In the end, it didn't matter anyway."

He stood, going silently to the window. He braced himself against the moulding, Gina holding her breath. "He put that in your suitcase," he finally said, not as question. "When he broke into your room."

"Yes."

After a few moments more, he said, "Where's your phone?"

She grabbed her purse, handing it to him.

He snatched it, hitting the redial button. “Was his the last call you received?”

“I think so.”

He tossed the phone to the bed. “There’s your answer. And there’s your stalker.”

She glanced at it. PRIVATE CALLER.

“Just like ‘yourbigfan’ last night. Looks like the District dick fucked up.”

She clasped her damp head. “I should’ve figured it. But why now? After all this time?” She stood, throwing off her towel. “Well, he can’t shut me up anymore.” She went to her suitcase, rifling through it, glancing at the clock. “Damn, we got to get out of here!”

He slammed her suitcase shut. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“What?” She threw it open. “Of course I am! I have to.”

“No.” He shoved it off the bed. “The only place you’re going is—”

He clamped a handcuff around her wrist and tossed her atop the bed, Doug clamping the other end to the iron headboard. She struggled against him, kicking and cursing, so violently a second later he cuffed her other wrist and she was pinned, arms spread and naked against the bars.

“You bastard! Get me out of these!”

“No. And I’ll stuff a gag in your mouth if you don’t shut up.”

“Motherfucker! Bastard! Son of a— *mummph!*”

He leaned over her, his sock in her mouth. “Listen to me and listen to me good. You’re not going to the rally. I won’t allow it. You lost this argument the second you told me you loved me.”

She rattled the cuffs, screaming muffled oaths.

He grabbed a T-shirt from his dresser, then turned. “Gina, I’m warning you. If you don’t shut up I’ll – oh, fuck it.” He tossed the shirt and kicking off his jeans, jumped atop the bed.

“I’ve dreamed of doing this,” he said, crouching between her legs. “You game?”

More muffled screaming. But when he touched her pussy, she almost flooded his hand.

“Oh, you’re ready. You’re sooo ready. This is what I love about you. Your spirit of adventure.” He slid himself in.

She screamed, muffled against the sock. He fucked her, the cuffs clanging against the bars.

“Love me?” he said, nipping her breast. “Love me, or were you lying when you said it?”

“Mm mmm mmmp! MM MMM MMMPH!”

He cocked his ear to the side. “What? What? I can’t hear you!”

“MMMMMMPPPH!”

“You don’t love me? Oh, Gina...” He inched out. “I guess that means...”

Suddenly the sock popped out, bouncing off his face. “I said I love you! What do you think I said, you bloody bastard? Now get that cock back in me. I’m almost ready to—”

Then she did, voluminously and exquisitely, like water flowing down a mountain, like a long undulation of waves, crashing against the shore.

“You’re mine, you hear me?” he said, fucking the climax right out of her. “This pussy will never see another cock besides mine, or so help me, Gina, I’ll...” And then he came too, filling her, overflowing. Almost as abruptly, he pulled out.

“Where are you going? Doug!”

But he was already yanking his jeans on, stepping into his shoes, gearing up. After he put on his jacket he unlocked one of the cuffs.

“Thank God, she said, rubbing her wrist as she sat up. “Now get the other one. We have to get out of here.”

Doug laid a key on the table on the other side of the room. “Here’s the key, in case there’s a fire.” He switched his phone for her BlackBerry, laying it on the table beside the bed. “Here’s my cell. Don’t bother with the contacts. All you’ll get is a bunch of cops,

squeals and a lot of women with names like Destiny and Desire.” He shoved the other pair of cuffs half into the back of his jeans. “And your own number, of course. But don’t use it because I won’t be answering.”

“Don’t do this, Doug. Don’t leave me here.”

He went to her, kissing her thoroughly. “She loves me. She *loves* me!” He grinned. “Ain’t life grand?” Then bolted for the door.

“Doug!” The door slammed below. She huffed, jangling the cuff. “Ten minutes!” she yelled. “Ten minutes, tops, and I’m out of here!”

* * * *

“Jack?”

“Doug, is that you? Where’s Gina?”

“She’s kinda tied up at the moment, so I’m on my way up without her. Do me a favor. Don’t let Ted Parks out of your sight.”

Silence, then: “It’s him, isn’t it?”

“You’re psychic, Jack.”

“I had a feeling. Precisely why his vetting isn’t over yet.”

“Is that why Lee Roland was in Philly the other night?”

“To slow the process down. You catch on quick, Welland. Maybe you should go into politics.”

“I’d cause too many scandals. And Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“Keep your head down. I’m coming in after him.”

He tossed the BlackBerry to the seat. “She loves me. She *loves* me!” He switched lanes, grinning all the way.

Chapter Twelve

COUNTY COURTHOUSE – RIVERBORO

Jesus, Doug thought, moving through the throngs of people gathered at the Courthouse steps. *I didn't know this many people gave a shit.*

Which normally he'd think would be a good thing. But on that morning the only thing in his head, as he snaked around the avid supporters, chanting protesters carrying signs, the loyal opposition and the random nutcase, was finding Ted Parks and strangling his scrawny neck.

The podium at the top of the steps was vacant, the high muckity-mucks still assembling behind the big glass doors. Ted was no doubt somewhere inside, and Doug sincerely hoped Falco was keeping him out of the way for the moment. Just below the local high school band played, squeaking out the occasional flat note. The police had the perimeter, squad cars lining the curb and uniforms milling about, and Doug made for them.

"Who's in charge here?" he said to an officer leaning against his cruiser.

The man eyed him. "Why? Someone steal your sign?"

Doug flashed his shield. "Cut the comedy. I'm not a fan. Now, who?"

The officer sniffed, thumb jutting over his shoulder. "Captain MacDuff. In the brown overcoat." Doug found him near the juror entrance talking to some more officers.

"Make it quick," MacDuff said, looking tired and impatient. "I'm about ten quarts low on caffeine." He eyed Doug's shield for a moment before dismissing the officers. "You're out of your jurisdiction, Lieutenant. This better be good."

"It isn't, and that's the problem." Doug gave him a thirty second lowdown. "You can check with Halchak if you want."

"You realize you're talking about the district attorney." He pulled out his phone. "Don't think I won't."

"If you want proof, don't use that phone—use mine." He held up Gina's BlackBerry.

“Everything you need is right here.”

* * * *

HENRY STREET – CITY OF CAMDEN

Gina rubbed her wrist; the damn thing was chafed as hell. Doug had handcuffed her three bars in, so the only way she could get a good two-handed grip on the iron headboard was to stand with her back to the bed and yank it in inches, alternately pulling and pushing it away from the wall, literally having to turn it around. It was slow, methodical work, getting to the key on the other side of the room, especially with her bare legs banging against the frame. The bed made a scraping sound against the wooden floor as she worked, but apparently, Doug had thought of that too. Being Sunday morning, the whole house was at church, and Gina was effectively on her own.

“Bastard,” she grunted, yanking again, yet inwardly, she exalted. Two and a half years was a long time to carry around such guilt, and to have it lifted now, her psyche felt as naked inside as she currently was outside. *Because he loves me.* She closed her eyes and yanked, the bed turned almost three quarters, the key a little more than a couple yards away. *And I love him.* Best feeling in the world. *Yank.*

She glanced around the room, catching little pieces of personality in the things scattered about. Police thrillers on his bookshelves: Lisa Scottoline, Michael Connelly. James Lee Burke. A book of poetry by Robert Burns. Biographies of Abraham Lincoln and FDR. *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Two Bill Brysons. *Push*.

What looked like original photography was on the walls: beach scenes, the RCA Victor building near the river, an old family photo. A three-gauge brass weather station: temperature, humidity, barometer. On the small table, a blue wrist band, a pack of Dentyne, loose change, the remote, a laptop. Two beer caps. *Yank.*

She was almost there, and even though she was naked, she wasn’t cold. Sweating, in fact. Sweating and still flushed from their lovemaking, covered in passion-bites and deliciously sore, no matter what she told him. She felt well fucked and still aching for it.

And to get at Ted Parks. *Oh yessiree*. She gave the bed one more push. *Not even Doug's going to rob me of that*. She stretched, straining toward the key.

* * * *

COUNTY COURTHOUSE

The point of Lee Roland's finger met the resolve of Doug Welland's chest. "No scene," Lee said. "And I mean it. I want this done as unobtrusively as possible. We do not need bad press this early in the game."

"I get you, Roland," Doug said, glancing down. Lee's finger quickly withdrew. "But neither do I want that fuck slipping away."

Lee tossed his gaze up the courthouse steps, past a union representative spouting his spiel to the crowd, to the oblique glass doors. "He's not going anywhere. MacDuff's got cops at every exit, and Parks has every expectation of joining the Congressman at the podium. All I'm asking is to wait until Falco goes out there."

"I can't wait that long," Doug said, his hand fisting.

"Well, you're going to have to," Lee said, turning away. "A half-hour, tops."

The crowd gave a around of polite applause. *Another one down*, Doug thought, another one on his way up. He glanced at his watch and smiled, sincerely hoping Gina didn't have to piss. Her phone rang.

"Doug." It was Falco. "How's it looking?"

"Where is he?"

"I have him in my sights right now. Don't worry."

His hand fisted again. "Oh, believe me, I'm not."

* * * *

HENRY STREET

Gina shoved the cuffs into the pocket of her skirt, figuring they might come in handy. She yanked Doug's shirt on over her bra and belted it, slipping into one of his jackets, rolling the sleeves and straightening the collar. She caught a whiff of his aftershave, a stab of loneliness shooting through her. She tossed her head, glimpsing

herself in the mirror. With her tangled hair long and loose, her feet in her highest shoes – four-inch faux alligator man-killers, she looked like an urban Amazon, especially when she slid on some Jungle Red lipstick. She tossed the tube into her purse; it clinked against the clasp of her wallet. Somewhere inside it was a single sheet of paper folded four times, tucked into one of those pockets rarely used, like the one that held Social Security or voter registration cards.

She never looked at it except to tamp it back in from time to time when a corner eased out. She carried it like an old scar in some private place, healed over but still aware of it. Gina eased open the wallet, thumbing back the pocket to take a glimpse. Of course it was there. The things you never wanted to carry in the first place usually were. But now it meant something altogether different. And that difference, for the first time, gave her courage. Down below a door slammed, and Miss Ella's voice floated through the house. She slung her purse over her shoulder and ran toward it.

Gina caught her just before she disappeared into her apartment. "Miss Ella!"

The woman turned, her brow arched. "Well, look who's here. Where's Douglas?"

"He left. Without me, and that's part of my problem. Miss Ella, Doug told me that's your grandson's car out front."

She glanced toward the old green Monte Carlo on the curb. "He's in the Army. Korea, right now. Why?"

"I need to borrow it for a couple of hours. My rental is back at the hotel, and I really need to get up to Riverboro." She dug into her purse, bringing out a wad of bills. "I can give you a hundred dollars if you let me use it."

"You crazy, girl?" She shoved the wad back. "I'm not gonna take your money." She eyed her warily. "Why did Douglas leave you here in the first place?"

Gina sighed. "Miss Ella, have you ever had a man keep you from doing something, saying it was for your own good? Like you're little child, and he can't figure out how you possibly could've made it to the age you are without him around, watching your every

step?”

“He doing that to you? Well, he must’ve had a reason.”

“Sure he does. He wants to wrap me in a little box and keep all the bad away from me. Well, I’ve seen a lot of bad and a lot of bad’s seen me, and there really isn’t too much that surprises me anymore. Except that maybe Doug thinks there is.”

She came closer. “Miss Ella, I have to get up to Riverboro. There’s something up there I have to finish for myself. And although Doug means well, he can’t do it for me. If he does it’ll never be over, and I can’t live like this anymore.”

“He’s a good man, you know. A good man who been troubled a long time now. You the cause of that?”

“Yes, I’m ashamed to say. But this is my one chance to make amends. I love him, more than anything in the world. But I have to do this myself if it’s ever going to be right between us.”

Miss Ella considered it a moment, her lips pursed, before finally turning into her apartment. “Come on, then.”

Gina followed her into a bright, cheery space, photos lining the walls. Miss Ella reached into a dish at a small secretary, pulling out a set of keys. “I want you to know I’m not doing this for you, but for Douglas. That man been in pain too long. But I can see he’s in love. It’s plain on his face when he looks at you. And no one should ever be alone.”

As Gina pocketed the keys, she asked, “Are you alone, Miss Ella?”

The older woman snorted dismissively. “I’ve outlived three husbands, and two more are lined up wanting the job. I’ve got four kids, two of them down the hall, and a pack of grandkids, all of who are gonna be here in two hours wanting my home cooking and anything else they can get out of me. Missy, I am the most *un*-alone woman on the face of the earth. If it wasn’t for the lock on this door, I’d never get any peace.”

Gina laughed. “Well, thank you, Miss Ella. I’ll leave you to it, then.”

“Just one more thing.” She looked to a framed picture of the president, her eyes softening. “Have you ever met him?”

Gina came up to her. "Yes, once. At a state dinner last spring."

She smiled wistfully. "Is he as handsome as they say?"

"Yes. And very charming."

"Was she there, too?"

"Yes. She's very elegant."

"Well, then." Miss Ella took her hand. "If those two people could tackle the biggest problems in the world and still be as much in love as they look to be, then there's hope for you two yet." She gave it a squeeze. "Good luck, honey."

"Thank you," Gina said. Because surely, she'd need it.

* * * *

COUNTY COURTHOUSE

"Just give me two minutes alone with him," Doug said. "Then I don't give a damn what you do."

"Don't push it, Welland." MacDuff said. "You're already too close to the case."

"Two minutes, then send him to Guantanamo, for all I give a shit." He disappeared through the doorway.

All the major players were already on the dais, the governor just introducing Jack Falco, formally throwing him his support and opening up Jack's campaign. After a short speech, Jack would name his successor. Doug slipped up the back staircase and into the courthouse lobby where Parks waited in a side office, fully expecting to be called out by Falco and named his successor. He inched to the doorway, glimpsing Parks gazing out a window to the dais.

"Yo, Parks."

Ted spun around. "Lieutenant! You startled me. Where's Gina?"

Doug leaned against the jamb. "She couldn't make it."

He shook his head slightly. "What do you mean? She was supposed to be here hours ago. Who's going to talk to the press after Falco announces?"

"Jack's a big boy. I'm sure he can talk for himself. The bigger question is, who's

going to talk for you?”

He eyed him coolly. “I’m doing it myself. I already have a press kit made up.”

“Really? I bet that’s a hell of a read. What’s it include?”

“Standard stuff. My accomplishments and family. About when I was mayor, district attorney, my interests like running, duck decoys, sculling—”

“You mean stalking?” He pushed himself from the doorway. “Or how about aggravated assault?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” he said, taking a step back.

“I’m talking about making terroristic threats, breaking and entering.” Doug grabbed his lapel. “How using something as innocuous as a phone and a computer to drive someone half out of her mind.”

“*You’re* half out of your mind!” Parks said, pushing him off. He looked to the hall. “Where’s security? Where the hell’s SECURITY!”

Doug shoved him against the desk. “No one can hear you, you little fuck. When I’m done with you, I’m gonna get you for everything short of murder and—”

“Rape. Let’s not forget that.”

They both looked to the doorway. “*Gina*,” Doug breathed, looking alternately angry and amazed.

Ted straightened. “Gina! What the hell’s going on here?”

“Why’d you do it, Ted?” she said, sauntering in. “Why’d you send me all those nasty little messages? What were you trying to prove?”

“Messages?” He looked from Gina to Doug and back. “Are you both insane?”

Doug pushed him again. “I know I am. Ask anyone. Now, should Gina repeat the question?” He grabbed his tie. “Or should I rephrase it for you?”

Ted shrugged him off, scrambling past him. “You can call me anything you want, but I’ll tell you what she is – a murderer.” His gaze shot to Gina, his eyes wild. “You’re down in Washington pushing for DNA verification for criminals – for *murderers*! when you’re a murderer yourself! You killed our baby! Didn’t you think I’d find out?”

“Our *baby*?” Gina cried, livid. “You bastard! You raped me!”

He laughed. “Gina, everyone knows you can’t rape a whore.”

Doug lunged at him, slamming him against the wall, his arm against his throat. “You piece of shit, I’ll fucking kill you.”

“Get...him...away...from—” he struggled out. “It was your...decision. No...one made you do...anything.”

“Oh no?” She unfolded a piece of paper, shoving it into his face. “You know what this is? This is the violations report of one Lucas Mumsford, one that would have sent him to jail for five years.”

His eyes flared. “I destroyed those files! Where—?”

“Out of the folder at the scene of the crime. Not like you noticed because rapists rarely notice anything when they’re otherwise engaged. Took me until today to realize that if I turn it in, Mumsford risks going to jail. If you do, it’d prove you were suppressing evidence. Double checkmate, Ted. You can’t hold anything over me again.”

Applause went up outside. Ted flinched toward it. “Oh, don’t worry about that. They’re just introducing Jerry Szabo as the new candidate for Congress. Looks like the bus to Washington is leaving without you.”

Ted went wild, struggling within Doug’s grasp. “Fucking bitch! Liar! I’ll get you—”

Doug’s fist clenched, ready to launch, but Gina grabbed his wrist. “No, darling, this pleasure’s all mine.” She hauled back and lunged, hooking Ted with a solid left. He slumped to the floor.

“Doll!” Doug cried. “I didn’t know you were a lefty!”

“Ambidextrous,” she said, shaking her hand. “Ow.”

Two uniforms shoved into the room, MacDuff, right behind them. “Welland!” he cried, eyeing Parks. “What’d I tell you? You bucking for a brutality charge?”

He threw up his hands. “Don’t look at me. We got us a Million Dollar Baby here.”

“Hi,” Gina said, hand flexing, the uniforms hauling out a dazed Ted Parks.

MacDuff snorted. “Gina Bardone, right? I’ve seen that name before.”

“Yeah, well, my days as the savior of lost causes is long over. I never want to see a courtroom again.”

He shook his head. “No, that’s not it. Are you related to someone name of Erika Bardone?”

She did a double take. “She was my aunt.”

“And a court reporter, right?”

“For more than forty years.”

“Go to Courtroom Four and look on the right side of the bench. It’s—”

“One floor up. I know. Why?”

“Just go and find out.” He looked to Doug. “But before you do...” He wagged his fingers. “The phone, please.”

Doug pulled the BlackBerry from his pocket. “Sorry, doll. They need it for evidence.”

“My phone? How will I ever...?” She took a deep breath and smiled. “I suppose I’ll just have to manage.”

“Come on,” Doug said, nodding toward the door. “Take me upstairs.”

He trailed her out into the corridor and up the staircase, their footsteps echoing through the empty building. Gina skulked through it all with a churchlike reverence, approaching awe when she yanked open the big, carved door to Courtroom Four. It was a wide, classical courtroom, with Ionic columns in the corners and murals on the walls, huge leaded and arched windows on either side of the tall oak bench, streaming rays of afternoon sun. She slowly walked up the aisle, head craning around, ending up at the left side of the bench. She bent into it.

“Oh my God,” she said softly.

Doug joined her. On the side of the bench was a small brass plaque:

DEDICATED TO ERIKA L. BARDONE, COURT REPORTER. FORTY YEARS OF SERVICE.

"I never knew," Gina said, her voice cracking. She turned around, sweeping her gaze over the courtroom. "I can't tell you how much time I spent here. And you know, Doug? I miss it."

"Then come back," he said. "And while you're at it..." He took her into his arms. "Come back to me, too."

"Oh Doug." She wrapped her arms around him. "I never really left."

"Neither did I." He kissed her, tangling his fingers in her hair. She sighed against him and he deepened his kiss, pulling her against him.

He nuzzled her neck. "You seem...taller."

"There's something to be said for four-inch heels."

"My wild woman," he said, growling in her ear. "You were magnificent back there." He slid his hands inside her jacket. "And you look totally smokin' in my clothes. Though I can't help thinking how much better you look out of them." He slid his hand down the slope of her behind, trailing it under her skirt to suddenly stop. "Hm, it looks like we're back to not wearing underwear."

"Well, I was kind of in a hurry. I wasted a lot of time dragging that monster of a bed across the room."

He pulled back, grinning lasciviously. "It's getting me hot just thinking about it."

"Well, I sure as hell worked up a sweat. Remind me to return the favor." She flashed the handcuffs from her pocket. "I'm definitely keeping these for a later date. It'll be your turn next time."

"I can hardly wait." He turned her around, pressing her back atop the clerk's table. "*I can hardly wait*," he breathed, sliding up her skirt.

"You wouldn't dare. Not in a *courtroom*!"

"Gina, my love, do you know the literal translation of *habeus corpus*?"

"*You shall have the body*."

"You shall," he grinned, his hand on his zipper and yanking down. "Mine. Over

and over again.”

“*Jus – necessitatis*,” Gina squeaked. “I’ll be right here.”

* * * *

CARMELLI RESIDENCE – RIVERBORO, NJ

Six weeks later

“Roark, is that you?”

He tossed his keys to the kitchen table. “No, it’s the vet from the Philadelphia Zoo. Heard you have a hippo ready to drop.”

Pam turned from sink, giving him the finger.

“Now, that’s the kind of behavior that got you in trouble in the first place.” He ran his hand down her massive belly, planting a kiss on top. “How’re my little guys today?”

“They’re having a dorm party inside. I could’ve sworn I smelled bong water. Hey.” She poked him. “Did you bring me a croissant?”

He dropped a bag to the counter. “Chocolate. Nice and sloppy. Just like you used to be.” Then he kissed her, sliding his hand down her behind.

She pulled back. “Don’t touch me! My hormones are going haywire these days. All I’m thinking about is sex.”

“No shit. What else do you think about when you can’t have it?” He sidled up next to her, filling a glass from the tap. “Doug called me today. He took that job with the Capital Police.”

She shook a colander full of cranberries. “So I guess they’re staying in D.C., then.”

“Well, yeah. Gina’s officially resigning at the first of the year, before Congress’s next session. Doug says she’s going back to lobbying, this time for children’s health care.”

“So I guess this means they’ll be setting the date soon?” She popped two berries into her mouth, crunching.

“Doug said sometime in February. They want to do it up here at the courthouse

– hey.” He pulled her hand back, just before she plucked another cranberry. “How can you eat those things raw? They’re sour as hell.”

“I don’t know! I *hate* cranberries. I guess there is something to this craving thing. Anyway, I’m glad they’re getting married in February. I’ll have these little monkeys out of me by then.”

“And me back in you,” he said, taking a sip of water. “Did the doctor call?”

“Finally. She said I’m to come in at eleven on Monday. Nothing to eat or drink from ten o’clock the night before.”

“Four more days. It’s really happening, then.” He slid his hand to her belly. “Are you nervous?”

Pam leaned her head against his shoulder. “I was, but now I just can’t wait to get it over with. And I’ve made a decision. While they’re in there rooting around, I want them to tie my tubes.”

“Babe, I told you I’d get it done. You don’t have to.”

“You misunderstand me, sweetie. I want to make sure this never happens again. With your super sperm? Every time we screw I’ll be afraid I’ll end up dropping a litter.” She sighed. “Roark, I swear to God, I love you and I already love these kids, but I never, ever want to get pregnant again.”

He kissed the top of her head. “You won’t have to. Not when I supersized you.”

“Oh Roark,” She nuzzled against him, taking in his warmth. Then all of a sudden she flinched. “Roark?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Please tell me you just spilled your water.”

THE END

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