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*Romance*

# HOT ZONE

BETTY WOMACK

## Hot Zone

Start with one woman who finally realizes her current love has been misplaced and demeaning. Add one man who screwed up his marriage and now distances himself from the subject of long-term relationships. Then, add a blazing gun battle in the Nicaraguan jungle.

Jessica Fontana is a Seattle-based Special Ops agent and engaged to a man who insists she give up her job because his society-minded family doesn't approve. Texas boy Jake Claypool is a Special Ops agent who married a society girl when he was too young to realize sexual desire goes out of the bedroom window when war is waged in every other room in the house. Now, the FBI is his only passion.

Sent on a dangerous mission to Nicaragua, new partners Jessica and Clay have to be tough enough to survive, but will they prove tough enough to let themselves fall in love?

**Genre:** Contemporary, Romantic Suspense

**Length:** 40,111 words

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## Chapter One

“You’re late, and I’m not laughing, buster.”

Jake Claypool took the cell phone away from his ear and considered tossing it out the window. This had to be the agent from Seattle. Obviously his new partner didn’t like to wait.

He didn’t try to soften the edge of irritation in his voice. “Ma’am. Mind identifying yourself?”

“Special Ops, Jessica Fontana. I’m standing here in the airport terminal with a group of Boy Scouts who are trying to look up my skirt.”

Jake glanced at his watch. The damned thing had stopped cold. “Look, Fontana. I apologize. Something came up, and I’m running late.”

“I noticed, Claypool. Would you just get here? Pronto.”

Fontana was going to be a barrel of laughs. She’d probably been dumped a few times in her life, and now hated all men. How did all these hostile women find him?

“Yeah.” He closed his phone and clenched his jaw, eager to get to the airport so he could set his new partner straight on a few things.

At the moment, he was too busy jockeying for a spot in the slow moving tie-up to care if the lady was stranded at Dallas Love Field.

Once out on the highway, he made better time, trying to keep his

mind on the traffic instead of a bitchy chick. Man, he was a magnet for women with hot tempers and cold blood. Curiosity crept into his mind like a wisp of smoke. Fontana had a sultry voice. And a razor-sharp tongue. He hadn't even met her yet, and she already sounded too much like his ex-wife.

He shook off the memory of their last meeting, her obvious sexual leanings toward her attorney and his own vow to steer clear of hearth and home scenes. He said good-bye to her and hello to permanent bachelorhood.

After parking what seemed like a mile away, Jake trotted to the terminal entrance and stopped to refill his lungs with a couple deep breaths. The heat sucked him dry and his head pounded. He straightened at the touch of a hand on his shoulder, and noticed the Restricted Area sign.

"Move on, mister. You got no business here."

Pulling his shield from his pocket, Jake identified himself to the Security guard. "Agent Claypool. FBI, picking up agent Fontana."

Getting clearance was no problem. Finding Ms. Fontana probably would be. Jake walked inside and looked around. If she was as hot as she thought, the boys would still be trying to look up her dress.

He slowed his pace to scan the area. His mouth curved into a sarcastic smile as he took in the heartwarming scene on the opposite side of the building.

Ah yes, holy hell. That had to be her. Surrounded by a troop of pubescent Boy Scouts, Jessica Fontana seemed to be in no distress. The gray silk skirt she wore clung to her lean curves, making it hard not to notice her.

She had style, and everything about her radiated self-confidence. The warm smile she flashed over the group of google-eyed boys rippled his blood, and he warned himself. That babe was his partner.

Agent Fontana was slim and tall, hot-looking, with dark, shoulder length hair and suntanned complexion. Probably had brown eyes, but he didn't care. There was a weapon under that short-sleeved jacket.

Fontana was an agent, and as far as he was concerned, she had a set of balls.

\* \* \* \*

Jessica noticed him standing at the terminal entrance, checking her out with his lawman eyes. Not bad to look at, well built, and she liked his rough-cut hair. He was too short for her taste. Being five foot nine, and wearing her three-inch heels, she'd be looking him square in the eye.

As he walked toward her, Jessica checked out his features. Mildly interesting. Lean jaw and chiseled lips. He looked short on words and heavy on action. Intense blue eyes and a slight hook in the bridge of his nose. Did his dark blond hair always look like it needed combing?

She picked up her flight bag and smiled at her group of admirers. "Okay, guys. My driver's here." She shook hands with the braver ones. "You've been so sweet. Thank you, men."

They groaned in protest and scowled at Jake, hanging back to observe as the older guy took charge.

"Agent Fontana?" His voice was like fine sandpaper on her ear lobe.

"If you're Agent Claypool."

She gazed steadily at him, noting the tic in his cheek.

"No one told me you'd be a comedian." He reached for her tote bag. "I'll take that."

She held it away from him.

"No thanks, I'll carry it."

"Suit yourself." He tossed another line at her over his shoulder. "The name is Jake."

"Fine," she said, not really caring what his name was.

They left the building, walking fast until she thumped his arm. "Is there a reason you can't get the car and pick me up here?"

He stopped and rubbed his chin. "Let me see. Oh yeah. You can't



cruise around in this area.” He reached for her bag again. “Give that to me. I have to get back to work.”

Thrusting it toward him, she put a lid on her resentment. “You’re not much on manners are you?” She caught his look of astonishment when she slipped off her heels and motioned for him to move. “Let’s go. I have to report in sometime today, too.”

When he stood inches from her and pinned her with his blue gaze, the soles of her feet tingled. He looked so normal at that moment she almost forgot he was a jerk.

“No need to do that. I’ll get the car.”

He didn’t wait for her to agree, leaving her to watch him stride off. Nice start. Her new partner seemed sour on the world, but she didn’t care about his personality as long as he didn’t get her killed. She was only on loan to this group because of her skills as a pilot and would head back to Seattle when the job, whatever it may be, was finished.

She looked up to see her troop of mini commandos piling into a yellow school bus. They yelled and waved from the open windows as the bus drove past. Wow. She was always a hit with kids and dogs. Her fiancé’s good-bye kiss hadn’t been half that demonstrative.

Thinking of him cooled her cheerful mood. Three years into their relationship, he’d attempted to put her in leg irons of refinement and bring her to what he considered a more suitable lifestyle. His family wasn’t happy with her social ilk. Their dislike of her had brought out a controlling kind of nature she’d never seen in him before. He seemed determined to force her into a new mold.

To please his parents, Clare had begun a constant siege on her job with the FBI and her burgeoning Air Parcel Delivery Company. He seemed to think both were a waste of time better spent doing charity work and furthering her education. She had come reluctantly to the conclusion he had been a true waste of time. But, she still had feelings for Clare. Exactly what, Jessica wasn’t sure.

Her edgy partner pulled up in a shiny black sedan and eyed her

with something close to contempt. She opened the door, threw her handbag in the back seat, and then slid in beside him.

“So, what did you say your first name is, Claypool?”

“Fasten your seatbelt.” He drove away from the entrance but not before checking out her legs. “Jake.”

“Jake?” She liked his name. Plain and up-front like him. “Okay.” She smoothed her skirt over her thighs.

“So.” His glance was brief but intense. “What do I call you?”

“Jessica.”

“Too girlie.” He looked at his watch, tapped it on the steering wheel several times. “While you’re with me, you’re Fontana.”

“Swell.”

Jessica relaxed in the comfortable leather seat, and after catching Jake’s second glance at her legs, she arched her brows and smiled knowingly at him. He wasn’t shamefaced at all. Not much on conversation either.

“Fontana, how long you been with the FBI?”

The question seemed reasonable, and she wanted to engage him in conversation. “You’re trying to find out old I am?”

“I know you’re over twenty-one, and if I wanted to know, I’d ask.” He leaned over to push the AC into high gear.

His aftershave brought to mind the rich scent of ginger jars and honey. That wouldn’t be too bad to wake up to.

Jessica had no need to be coy with him and openly checked him out while he drove. If her steady stare bothered him, he didn’t break under pressure. Taking a chance he might not be completely antisocial, she took up the conversation where he left off.

“I’m thirty-one. And you are...?”

“Twenty-nine.” He grinned and looked straight ahead.

She gazed at him, eyes narrowed in an assessing manner. “I’ll bet you’ve been with the Department a long, long time. Since you became legal.” She chuckled. “You still get carded, don’t you?”

The question forced him into his true personality. “Just so you

know, I'm plenty old enough to handle an older lady like you."

"Claypool." She couldn't help curling her toes when he practically rode the bumper of the car in front of them. "That's the way I like it. Say what you mean. I won't put your ass in a sling with a harassment suit if you don't get insulted when I tell you I've spanked better boys than you."

His jaw relaxed a bit while he thought over her proposition. "Sounds fair to me. Just so we understand each other, you get no special treatment because you're female."

"Exactly what I was thinking." Jessica could practically see the wheels turning in his head. He could be taught that she would be one step ahead of him at all times.

He nodded in her direction. "We might get along after all."

She doubted that, but liked the fact their relationship was laid out and they could get on with business.

"Do you have any idea why the Department sent me down here?"

His glance in her direction was fleeting. "Beats the hell out of me." He tapped his watch on the dash. "Just want to see how I handle stress, maybe."

"I'll pretend you're joking." She turned her head and looked at the blur of scenery passing by her window. Putting up with Texas heat and Jake was no big deal. She'd been through worse. Back in Seattle, her world was crumbling, and she would have to make some hard decisions soon.

This was temporary. One mission and back home to Seattle.

Agent Claypool didn't engage her in conversation again until they drove into the agency's underground garage. The place was like a cave, cool and dimly lit. She unbuckled her seatbelt and slipped her shoes on, arching her brows at his lack of manners. Jake got out, immediately forgetting her. He was involved in a personal phone call at the moment and paced in front of the car. She didn't expect him to open her door. He didn't.

She got out, noting a dozen gleaming, midnight-blue sedans

parked approximately four feet apart, wheels all tuned to the right.

Claypool opened the heavy glass door to the lobby of the building and waited for her to catch up with him.

“This way, Fontana.” He loosened the knot of his tie a little and looked at his watch.

He headed down a hallway, leading her into a small room. The walls were covered with maps and greatly enlarged aerial shots of rough terrain and mountains. A section was an obvious schedule for takeoff and landings for a variety of airplanes pictured next to the schedules.

“What’s the Beech Craft for? Coyote hunting?”

She finally had his attention.

“You’re a pilot?”

“Damned good one.”

“Bush or purist?”

“Either, but I prefer the challenge of the bush.”

His lips twitched in a brief smile. “Yeah. I figured as much.”

Jessica didn’t take his words as a compliment. He probably meant she looked like a wild woman. She slid a quick glance to his profile, smiling at the thought he might dread flying with her.

## Chapter Two

Jake figured he must have been living right. *A new assignment that guaranteed adventure and some danger, too.* After a long sobering look at the group's newest agent, his feeling of jubilation flattened.

Fontana. The woman appeared to be soft and lush in her golden suntanned hide. Jake made a sound of self-derision under his breath and leaned back in his chair. While the group supervisor, Frank Adler finished up a phone call, Jake waited with Fontana in the conference room. Sitting where he was at the table, the long once-over he gave her went undetected.

How old was she, really? Late twenties? Early thirties? Didn't matter. She didn't interest him past her being an agent who wore short skirts.

Fontana pushed back from the table and crossed her legs. They were slender with nice muscle definition clear up to her tight looking thighs. She wore no stockings, and the tan of her legs was the way he liked his toast.

When she rocked back against the chair, he caught a flash of the lace on her white panties. And now, she dissected him with her stare. She'd seen him eyeballing her legs. Damn, they looked good.

Jake concluded he might as well get to know her better before they flew off into the wild blue yonder together. Her eyes sought him out continually, or was he simply looking for an invitation? Hell, she hadn't given him a glance since they'd arrived at headquarters. He admitted to giving her the pre-sex assessment a hot looking woman always gets. Whatever, he was going to break the ice. He stood, and

leaned over her shoulder.

“Let me buy you coffee after the meeting.” No use being unfriendly, maybe get things on the right path. *Damn it!* He should lift his head, but his senses were wolfing down her scent.

*Subtle. Floral, something soft and old fashioned. Like...yeah, that was it. Apple blossoms in the spring sun.*

“Claypool? You look so pensive.” She was messing with him if the gleam in her eye meant anything.

They were having that talk for sure now. He couldn't let her believe he was dumb as he probably appeared.

“Sorry, Fontana. I was trying to hear Frank.”

Jake couldn't believe he found her interesting along with being irritating as hell.

“Agent Fontana.” Frank waited in his office doorway. “Come inside, and I'll give you the overview of our plans.”

Jake couldn't help but look toward the open office door after she went inside. What the hell? All of a sudden he had one thought on his mind. Fontana. Perfectly reasonable. His life would depend on her, and naturally, he was curious about her.

She'd obviously been good enough to get a spot with them. That meant she passed muster.

Like hell it did. He'd heard of the push to get females up to the top. He sure as hell didn't want her damned spike heels on his skull.

Jake shifted his attention to the open leather folder in front of him. In it were hot documents of information on their target's mode of operation and exact location at the time. That could change rapidly if he felt he was being watched.

Several other agents sauntered into the room and sat down at the table. They spoke to him and sat around the table, sharing information they had managed to gather on this upcoming job. The usual kidding was absent today. Like him, they were eager to hear more on the latest mission.

A soft, smoky laugh pulled his attention, and he couldn't resist

looking up. Fontana walked with absolute self-assurance from Frank's office and came straight to where he sat.

She slid into the chair next to him and tapped the folder. "This is going to be a challenge."

He nodded, and slid the folder toward her. "You can depend on that." The scent of spring drifted by his nose again.

"I gather from your comment that you have concerns about my ability to keep up with you." Her fine brows arched slightly. "Does my sex bother you?"

Her fingers brushed his. They were long and slender, and he wondered if they were strong. "I'll get back to you on that." His brusque response was interrupted as Frank began the meeting.

"You all know this is a must do takedown." The group supervisor put a DVD into the machine and tapped a pencil against the table. "In the last few days, the chatter has been more intense about this guy, Armod Azizi."

Jake sat forward a little and Fontana leaned back to study the face on the screen. Frank waited a few seconds before going on to the next photo.

"So far, this enemy of the United States and our allies has kidnapped, tortured, and beheaded a dozen innocent men and women." Frank stared at the round, bearded face on the screen. "We've caught a break. Right now, he has no one as a prisoner that we know of."

Jake thought of the image on the screen as a fat, loco rich momma's boy with a yen for killing. "How does this guy get in and out of the country? He's pretty recognizable."

Frank nodded and tapped a small insert photo at the bottom of the screen. "You hit it on the head. Until we were sure the kidnapper was Azizi, his oil rich friends hustled him in and out over the Mexican border. He's never without funds or friends."

Jake noticed Fontana leaning against him ever so lightly. She finally reached over his arm to pull a map book closer to her.

“You could’ve asked for that.” He enjoyed the press of her smallish, but firm breast against his arm.

“You could’ve simply shared.”

She must have gotten a charge out of the contact, too, judging by the way she crossed her arms over her breasts.

Frank tapped his finger on the table. “Fontana has been loaned to us by the Seattle group because of her former knowledge and expertise in flying the South American route.”

Unable not to look at her, Jake turned in his chair to see her gazing back at him, her lips curved into a Mona Lisa smile.

She did have a way about her.

The meeting took on a sense of urgency. Frank set up a preliminary look at the flight to Nicaragua and takedown of Azizi.

“Claypool and Fontana will fly a confiscated Beech Craft Barn that belonged to a drug smuggler from Colombia. The aircraft has been retooled and outfitted by the military for long-range flights. All amenities have been removed to conserve on fuel.”

“A Baron?” Fontana wrote something in his notebook she blatantly took over. “A nice choice, Frank.”

Frank? Pretty damn cozy already. Jake wanted to smirk in her direction. He didn’t even rate a smile or a kiss-my-ass, and she calls the supervisor by his first name. *Jesus, man. Get it together.*

She grimaced and shoved his notebook in his direction. “I forgot to bring mine. Sorry for touching your stuff.”

Jake wanted to comeback with something that would un-snap her bra, but kept his mouth clamped shut. He’d think of something appropriate later.

Frank went on, apparently satisfied with the team he was sending to put a stinking terrorist out of commission.

“Okay, we know Azizi is holed up in his stronghold in northern Nicaragua because of a recent heroin overdose. That couldn’t have come at a better time. He won’t be running off anytime soon.”

“He’s a dooper?” She sounded surprised.



“He got hooked on the junk while being treated for a social disease. Don’t ask me which one.”

The group remained quiet, but there were several grins because of the supervisor’s comment. He looked through his notes before resuming. “The plan is for agents Claypool and Fontana to fly to a private airstrip outside Granada owned by a well compensated farmer. There’ll be a four wheel drive waiting there for them.”

Jake tried to recall when a mission went the way it had been laid out. He couldn’t. “Is there a head count on his paid thugs?”

“He travels light, always has at least nine gunners with him. He’s superstitious about numerals.” Frank waited while Jake thought over the odds.

“Nine?” Jake flipped his notebook cover down. “We should be able to handle that.”

“I realize this is being carried out as black ops, and will be deniable, but you’re going to try to take him without confronting his men. Period.”

Jake saw no need to bring up the fact that the supervisor’s expectations were probably unattainable. It wouldn’t happen. Hot lead was going to fly, and people were going to die. He just hoped he wasn’t one of them. And, now there was his new partner. If she could shoot as well as she tossed bull, he’d come out of this in one piece.

Jake’s head ached with the information dump Frank had laid on them. The man had asked the impossible. Plus he wondered about Fontana. Okay, stop thinking of her as a woman. She carries the same weapon you do and has gone through the same training.

Only one problem. He wasn’t sure he would be able to stop thinking of her as a hot little number, one that smelled of apple blossoms.

## Chapter Three

Jessica studied Jake's profile, trying to figure him out. His sudden change of attitude from grump to Mister Nice Guy didn't impress her. He probably had a dozen women squirreled away, so hitting on her wasn't on his mind. Not yet. But, he wasn't the type to buy her coffee just to regale her with tales of his history in the department. All seven years of it. Men. Right now, she could do without ever seeing one again.

One in particular. She relented and let her mind bring her fiancé into the mix. Her soft snort went unnoticed as she mentally said his name. Clare. A man should have a masculine, rough name, like her partner here. Jake. Kind of an old west cowboy.

Her mood darkened. She'd been with Clare Dykstra three years, and until recently, there hadn't been any problems. Not really. He'd occasionally given her flack over some of the books she read, and movies she liked. Yes, she loved the old movie channel and soft jazz was her music. Too ordinary. The criticism had become persistent and irritating.

And lately, there was the carping about her home and her friends and the biggest issue, her job.

Jake nudged her arm. "Whatever you're thinking about will still be there if we go have coffee."

She pulled herself together and focused on his face. His very attractive face. His skin glowed with a healthy tan and close shave. He probably used skin conditioner. "Just trying to remember if I left the iron hooked up in my apartment." Good, he laughed at her self-deprecating comment. They might get along after all.

The coffee shop he spoke of was close by. They walked together with little conversation until they were inside the attractive brick building. The big glass windows in front sported ruffled blue-and-white gingham curtains.

Because they weren't staying long, they sat at the gleaming counter on red leather and chrome stools. The aromas of brewing coffee and fresh cinnamon rolls filled the shop. She thought of home and Sunday mornings.

The place was cozy with clean floors and neatly groomed waitresses who brought coffee with a smile, and smelled of Chantilly perfume. Jessica loved the frilly handkerchiefs pinned in the pockets of their starched pink uniforms. They all had French manicures and clean-looking hands.

The coffee was excellent, straight and strong. From the corner of her eye, she watched Jake drop four sugar cubes into his cup. He took a cake donut from the glass domed display case next to him.

"That's a lot of sugar, Claypool."

"I need it." He bit into the donut and took another from the case. "Want one?"

Tempting as it was, Jessica declined. "No thanks. Coffee is plenty."

"Suit yourself. I need the energy to hold me over until this evening."

She was only mildly curious about what he did with his free time. "You don't eat until evening?"

He chewed a couple times, and then nodded. "I'm too busy to waste two hours a day stuffing my face."

"Sounds like you're nonstop busy." She thought he might drop some personal information about himself.

"Yeah, but not that busy. Just a routine I've gotten into."

To her, that sounded like a divorced man. Confirmed bachelor? Gay? What was wrong with her? What did she care? She didn't give a rip what he did. She didn't want to reveal tidbits about her miserable

personal life. *Work, let's talk work.*

“Have you heard of Azizi before now?”

Jake stirred his coffee. “Yeah, he’s been on the radar for a while. We inherited him from CID. They found him too insignificant, even though he’s taken the heads of American citizens.”

She nudged his arm. “I’d like to see what you have.”

“I’d love to show you what I have.”

He grinned at her for the first time, and her stomach did a mini buck-and-wing.

Jake paid their tab, and ten minutes later, they were back at work, poring over the information they had on Azizi.

Jessica found that he hadn’t overstated the amount of good information HSD had on Azizi. She sat with Jake in his cubicle and studied the habits and life of a man who had every material wealth, but no compassion. His bloodlust had claimed countless lives.

The picture of a young family seemed sad to her. Azizi held a baby, and the attractive woman that was listed on the back as his mother held a fluffy, gold colored dog. That seemed to be quite telling of her preferences. The children came in a low second after the mutt. Azizi the boy stared ahead, and his eyes had no sparkle or gleam.

She voiced her thoughts. “Funny. He doesn’t look the type.”

Jake leaned back in his chair and glanced at the picture in her hand. “They never do.”

Jessica could imagine Claypool at that age, strutting his stuff for the camera and eyes blazing with a mean streak.

After a few minutes of silence, he brought up the subject again. “I’m interested. What makes a guy look like a killer to you?”

“That smug, wrinkled smile around the eyes. A certain tilt of the head and lips. This guy doesn’t enjoy anything.”

A sense of being stared at made her look in Jake’s direction. Oh, Lord. She should have focused on the picture.

His eyes were spring-storm blue and seemed to take in every detail of her face. Probably not. She was well aware her partner was a

total legman.

She shifted her gaze to the video screen where a recent photo of Azizi was displayed. Somehow, she could only see Jake.

Tonight, she had to call her fiancé. She was getting off track not knowing what he was thinking or doing. This had to be settled and soon. She had no time to spend chasing him down each time he flew into a snit. She was thirty-one, not sixteen.

Jake enlarged the photo, and then put another CD in the machine. "We have this tape of Azizi's voice as he toasts a bride and groom."

Jessica nodded and waited for him to turn up the volume. Jake didn't say anything, only grinned while she listened to the voice that sounded as if it had swallowed a tank of helium. Straight out of a cartoon, but she didn't laugh.

She straightened the files on the table. "That's kind of funny."

"Hell yes." His laugh was nice.

They moved on in their study of the target. She liked the fact that when she asked a question, he had an answer that made sense. Something about this photo of Azizi puzzled her. One of many things.

She gazed at the man in the brightly colored photo and the huge slice of watermelon he was consuming. Unlike the average person, his expression didn't reveal any pleasure.

"He's constantly eating." She examined the man and his treat closely.

"He's never satisfied." Jake's smile was crooked.

"Says here Azizi is five foot four. Not too good on a killer's self-image."

"He special orders shoes with lifts in them. They add several inches to his height." Jake gazed at her like he'd known her a lifetime, waiting for her thoughts on the unattractive man in the picture.

She wanted to grin. Guys who looked like Claypool always felt superior to men like Azizi. They were complete opposites. Claypool was six feet of lean, virile muscle, and Azizi was a shrimp. An effeminate looking, overweight guy with too much power and

wanting to prove his manhood had chosen the way of the monster.

“So, he’s a playboy?” She didn’t understand how that could be, but it was possible.

“To the max.” Jake’s expression was smug. “It’s been documented from extremely reliable sources that he’s damned sorry in the sack. His family shuns him since he strayed from the path of righteousness. He slept in lots of beds while he was in France.”

Jessica’s thoughts rushed back to her own situation.

Her fiancé had stopped wanting sex months ago. Why hadn’t she wondered about that? Or, cared?

Oh, yeah. She definitely had to do something about her cruddy life and do it soon.

The room seemed cozier in the late afternoon light pouring through the windows. Jake took her full attention when he rose and went to look at the duty roster board.

He tapped the list of names and then looked at her. “We’re penciled in for weapons proficiency tomorrow.” He was getting his sport coat that he’d removed earlier. “Not much going on here. You feel like going to the track for a run right now?”

Okay. Now he was going to show her how fast and strong he was. He thought. Jessica stood and walked to where he braced a hand on the wall.

“Sure thing.” Like a real ingénue, she smoothed her hair. “I’ll just have to get my things from the hotel the Department set me up in.”

“Hey, no problem.” He reached into a wall cabinet and handed her a set of keys. “Your assigned car is number 69.”

His smile was cute, disarming, and totally challenging.

“Why don’t you show me where my hotel is? I don’t have the lay of the land yet.” She smoothed her skirt, giving her rear an extra rubdown for his benefit. “Ready?”

He seemed to have a problem pulling his gaze from her backside. Good deal. She wanted him to be distracted for their run on the track. He was so transparent. He was going to test her, find out who the best

man was. He would learn to live with disappointment because it would ultimately be the best woman he lost to.

## Chapter Four

Car 69 drove like a dream and was squeaky clean, except for the wadded up gum wrapper on the floor mat. As Jessica followed Jake through the late afternoon traffic, she suspected he led her on a fox chase.

Using the electronic map on the dash, her suspicions were confirmed. What should have taken ten minutes turned into twenty-five.

He stopped at a light and turned his left turn signal on. Pulling up behind him, she could see him gazing at her in the rearview mirror. Probably thinking he'd lost her.

If she read the dashboard map right, her hotel was just down the block. This was the place. Very nice, appearing to be set in a mini forest of trees that seemed to grow out of the steaming sidewalk. Did it ever cool down in Texas? She noticed an Italian restaurant within walking distance. And a bar. No chance of seeing the inside of that place.

She followed Jake up the driveway to the front entrance. He got out and came back to tap on her window, waiting until she lowered it.

"I'll go in with you. Just to make sure everything's ready." His smile was barely visible, but she had seen it.

Was he thinking of getting in her pants? Probably. If not, she wasn't much of a woman. If nothing else, Claypool was going to be a hot and fun diversion while she was in Texas.

"Sure thing." Jessica got out of her car and watched him drive away. What she felt wasn't guilt when a tingle of anticipation skipped up her spine. Maybe this wasn't going to be as much fun as she



thought. He didn't appear to be in any difficulty over her, and here she was shivering like it was prom night.

Yes, it was guilt that made her jump when the bellhop came up behind her.

"Welcome to Dallas." He stepped back to let her move away from the car. "I'll see to your luggage, ma'am."

She shook her head. "One small bag is all I have with me. My luggage should have arrived here this morning."

"Yes, ma'am."

She handed him the keys. He took her bag from the trunk and assured her he would handle things.

"I'll see to everything, and while you register, I'll park your car."

"Thank you." She glanced around. "I appreciate it."

Okay, so Claypool left. She had been dumped a few times. But damn, she wanted him to take her to the track and try to make her cry uncle.

The bellhop led the way to the lobby and left her at the front desk where she got her key card. She headed for the elevators, hit by a wilting sensation until someone called her name.

"Fontana."

A zing of excitement shimmied up her spine. "I thought you might have decided to go ahead without me."

She had to reign in her crazy, illicit, unexplained desire to be with this guy. Jake was a lone wolf, prowling for a quick piece of ass, and she was oozing enough pheromone for six women. And, at the moment, she didn't know if she was a free woman.

He cupped her elbow in his damned wonderful, male hand, and walked her into the elevator. She couldn't help it if she swayed into him when the elevator lurched.

"Hey, you okay, Fontana?"

"Yeah."

She heard his deep intake of breath as he leaned close, his nose imperceptibly grazing her cheek. "What the hell is that?"

She stuttered much to her disgust. “Wh–What’s what?”

His hand grazed her lower back. “The way you smell.”

“Family secret.”

The tension in his body radiated to her loud and clear. Dear Lord! So this was how a one-night stand with a stranger began? Jake’s voice stroked her breasts, making the cheeks of her ass tighten.

“Secret, huh? I’m pretty good at unwrapping secrets.”

*Whush!*

The door opened in time to pull her back into reality.

“This is my floor.” Could she have sounded anymore stupid?

He looked up and down the hall, his cowboy attitude making him too hot to ignore. “Yup, looks like it, ma’am.”

Hell. He wasn’t helping her remember her job or her fiancé. *You will do the adult thing and get on the phone as soon as you can, and call Clare.*

“I’ll go in and see if my luggage has arrived.” *Well, sure he would stare at you for not inviting him in. Why did she feel like Little Red asking the wolf in for a bite?* “Come on in while I change.”

He nodded and sauntered into the suite, giving the place a quick once-over before leveling his gaze on her.

Her luggage had arrived and was placed neatly on the padded bench at the foot of her California King bed. My God! Why on earth would anyone need a bed of that size? She quickly moved away from the inviting bed with its white and crimson comforter and umpteen tasseled pillows.

She opened both the pieces of luggage, searching through them until she found her running shoes and turquoise terry pants. She pulled out the matching short-sleeved pullover.

Jessica turned and noticed Jake studying the picture of her fiancé clipped to the inside of her suit carrier. The photo had been there for a year or more, and lately she had given its removal some thought. He seemed to be passing silent opinion on Clare, and her stomach knotted with anger at Jake. She shouldn’t mind his quiet assessment of her

fiancé.

Clare was a good-looking man. Oh sure, Jake was a hell of a lot more macho and could hold his own in any fight, but Clare had other qualities. *Stop it! Why the hell are you defending that guy after he's practically ignored your existence?*

Jake arched a brow and gestured in a negligent manner toward the photo. "Boyfriend or husband?"

Okay. She'd been too nice too long. Time to nip the moment in the bud with this hot shot. "Does it matter?"

The couch made a creaking noise as he stood and took a step toward her. "Not a damn bit."

Getting dressed wasn't the real reason for her fast exit from the living room. He was calling her bluff, and she was enjoying it far too much.

In the sanctuary of the bathroom, she thought over her situation. A woman with a failed relationship, obviously considering crawling all over her partner, for Christ's sake! Maybe Clare's family hadn't been too wrong about her. She'd fallen apart at the seams from the moment Jake Claypool walked into her line of vision.

There's nothing going on. *Talk to him. Act normal if you still have the capability.*

"Where are your running clothes?" She hoped he didn't want to stop at his place.

"I have a locker in the clubhouse at the track."

She wasn't sure, but his voice seemed to be edged with some impatience. "I'm ready. Almost."

Dressed and ready to leave, Jessica walked back to the sitting area.

He looked around the room as if he were planning on making some changes before his penetrating gaze swept over her. "I never rush a lady."

His total ease around her posed some problems to the plan to make him jump hoops. He wasn't going to be easy. Somehow, she

found that damned exciting.

She picked up her weapon and holster. “Think I can park my Glock in your locker?”

He calmly observed her clipping the lethal weapon to the waist of her pants. “Sure. Always room for one more gunner.”

After belting a matching fanny pack low over her hips, she was ready and nodded. “Let’s go.”

The hunter’s gleam in his eyes perfectly matched his comment. “I’m on your tail.”

\* \* \* \*

Jake secured Fontana’s Glock 21 next to his Glock 17 in the locker. *Just a couple of shots less than his gun.* He closed the door, locked it, and pulled on a gray T-shirt. After tightening the string in his jog pants, he was ready to challenge Fontana.

For an instant, he wondered why he cared about besting her. Hell, what if she kicked his ass? Naw, never happen.

After watching Fontana stretch for several minutes, he wanted to sound confident and nonchalant when he spoke to her. “When you’re limber enough, we’ll run the track once to warm up.” He’d come off sounding ignorant as hell if he read her reaction correctly. The sensation of being touched moved over his body when she straightened and smiled at him.

She moved her hips from side to side and put on a phony pout. “Just once?”

Hell. She was going after his nut, and he was going to enjoy it. “I’ve got plenty of juice in me if you want to go for more.”

“I’ll let you know.”

At last, she was ready for the run. They walked down a grassy slope and through a gate to the track. She waited until he stood next to her to lay out her rules.

“No pushing, no shoving, and no grabbing my hair when I blow

by you.”

The woman had the gonads of a Marine battalion. He was quickly warming to her. “Whatever you say, ma’am.”

They lined up, her small foot planted against his size twelve and a half wide. He glanced at her, seeing her jaw set in determination. He couldn’t help teasing her. “I’ll wait for you down by the gate.”

He was left to stare after Fontana as chat flew back in her breakaway. She was off like a shot, halfway around the track before he got up any steam. Was it his imagination or was there really a turquoise blur trailing in her wake? *Hellfire.*

Jake sprinted after her, beginning to close the distance with her fine ass uppermost in his thoughts. What was he doing? She was an agent, not a weekend pickup at a bar.

He should let it go and get his damned mind on the business of firming up their assignment plans. Bull! Both were doable, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to let her win this race. Catching up with Fontana wasn’t hard, but he let her stay a few steps ahead of him until she looked over her shoulder.

“One side, woman. I’m coming through.”

“Kiss my ass, Claypool. You haven’t done it yet.”

He made his move and ran up onto the grass center of the track. She fell back a half step, then reached out to grab for his shirt. Holy crap! She hooked her fingers in the waist of his pants and fell, bringing him down with her.

They rolled across the damp grass and came to a groaning halt.

“Are you nuts, lady?”

She sprawled back laughing and looking so damned sexy his groin drew up painfully with craving. He wanted to look away when she met his gaze, but he didn’t. She smart-mouthed him as he expected.

“You didn’t really think I was going to let you get by with that, silly man.”

Jake laughed and eased some of the tension in his crotch. “Come on. You still haven’t beaten me.” He got to his feet and pulled her up.

She didn't seem to notice how low her pants had fallen. He licked his lips, taking in the firm definition of her belly and the sculpted lines of her ass. She was saying something to him, and he jerked to attention.

"Claypool, let's try running together this time. Okay?"

"Suits me." He worked his shoulder and scowled playfully at her. "You hurt me."

"Oh, grow up."

The way she grabbed her pants and pulled them up was done with real authority, and no pretense at being coy or dainty. He nearly swallowed his tongue when she reached back to pull them out of her crack and then walked away.

Lord, love that thin material. He didn't doubt for a second Fontana would be the best thing he'd ever had in the sack.

\* \* \* \*

Jessica had enjoyed throwing Claypool on his ass, and his good-natured way of accepting defeat. He'd been hard while they were in physical contact and hadn't been shy scoping her out. *Will you listen to yourself? Focus on being his mission partner. That's it!*

Jake emerged from the men's locker room, dressed in slacks and sport coat, acting cocky as usual.

"Shake a leg and I'll drive you home."

She took her weapon he held out to her and clipped it onto her waistband. "What time do we fire weapons?"

His crooked grin and easy talk was quickly growing on her. "Still wanting to take me on?"

The crooked grin on his firm mouth drew her gaze completely. Yes, he could smell the pheromone and hormones at war in her panties. Her erotic juices ran wild as Jake casually rubbed her lower back. *My God! Go call home before you get in too deep.*

## **Chapter Five**

Jessica was relieved to be a passenger while Jake drove her to the hotel. She was free to plot out the conversation she would have with her fiancé. Talking to him had become increasingly difficult lately. He had become ever more distant and judgmental.

Worry and guilt over her ridiculous feeling for Jake ate at her. Clare must be hiding some illness from her. Sure, that must be it.

The feeling of being stared at forced her to put Clare on the back burner for the time being.

Jake looked away, obviously wondering about her pensive mood. He finally broke the silence.

“You didn’t get hurt in that fall, did you?”

A show of concern from him was unexpected and cute.

“Just a bruise or two.”

He attempted a sympathetic smile. “Want me to rub something on those bruises?”

She sat up straight, and patted the weapon on her belt. “Rub this.”

“Gotcha.”

He nodded and drove the rest of the way to the hotel in silence, a grin on his sexy mouth.

Jake pulled up under the portico at the hotel’s front entrance, and leaned across her to open the door.

She got out and started to go inside when he called her name.

“Fontana. Want to have dinner?” He inclined his head toward the Italian restaurant down the street. “I hear that place serves great food.”

She shook her head. “Thanks, but no.” Her every fiber wanted to

say yes, but her mission was clear. “Maybe another time.”

He shrugged. His voice was teasing, but his words hit home. “Gotta check in, huh?”

Jessica couldn't believe how embarrassed she was. He had seen through her. “Goodnight, Claypool.”

There was no way to conceal her stiff back and stomping off toward the hotel entrance.

She didn't look back, not until that could be done with no chance he could see her. Claypool seemed to take a hell of a long time leaving. The second he drove away, she hurried to the elevators.

Dread of being alone in that fancy, formal suite gave her a headache. She couldn't help thinking about the day that had been full and fun. Yeah. She had enjoyed being with Claypool and looked forward to their mission. If her phone call went as well, she would be able to sleep.

She went inside her suite and locked the door. The thought of hearing a familiar voice lightened her mood. She dropped onto the down-cushioned, white brocade couch and took her cell phone from her fanny pack to punch in Clare's number. She let it ring a dozen times.

Lying back and kicking off her shoes, she let the phone ring another ten times before losing patience. Where was he, and why was he taking so long to pick up? Six more rings and she snapped her phone shut.

The emotion she experienced was not worry, jealousy, self-doubt, or concern. She was angry. He'd been adamant about her calling him that evening.

Adamant! The hell with that. Now she was thinking in his stiff neck language. If he wanted to hear from her, he'd have to make the call.

Grabbing a nightgown and panties, she closed herself off from her problems in the white and ocean-blue bathroom. The shower sprayed hard and hot on her aching head and shoulders, lulling her into a



temporary peace. That was short-lived as her inner turmoil went on a rampage, the emotional pain in her gut screaming to be free.

She had willingly tried for three years to fit into Clare's world, attempted to gain his family's approval, and damn well screwed that up.

None of that mattered now. Clare and she could have made a go of it. She was sure of that. Wasn't she? Hell no! She wasn't.

The outcome was up to Clare now. He'd have to convince her to try again. The thought almost made her laugh with a touch of hysteria. He would never beg, and she would never bend. She wasn't in love.

\* \* \* \*

Jake leaned against the windowsill, casually drinking his coffee and looking down at the traffic on the street. He was a little early, so Fontana would be coming in soon. He no longer berated himself for thinking about her. It happened so often, he figured it to be a waste of time.

The click of high heels on the tile floor outside the office made him turn to face the open door. Fontana stood there, looking like a runway model in a bad mood.

He held his cup up. "Want coffee?"

"I'll take the largest cup you have."

"You got it." He was curious about her about face in mood. He grabbed a large Styrofoam cup, and filled it with the strong coffee. "Cream? Sugar?"

"Both. Double on both."

Jake stirred in the cream and sugar, then put the cup in her hand. "Careful. Hot."

She didn't pull back when he held his hand over hers to steady the cup.

Fontana had looked sizzling hot yesterday. Today, she was distant seduction, unapproachable, all hard-ass Special Ops.

He cooled his randy gaze when she leveled her dark gaze on him.

“Claypool. I believe you mentioned firing weapons.” Her voice had a cutting edge to it.

“You and me. Anytime you’re ready.” He carefully placed the cup on his desk.

Fontana was incredible, dressed in navy slacks and a white cotton shirt unbuttoned to mid-chest, topped off with a long black knit vest. His discerning gaze took it all in, right down to the narrow leopard belt around her waist.

Several bangles clinked on her wrist when she lifted the cup to take a drink. “Let’s go.”

After checking out the duty board, they left the office. Fontana kept a distance between them, and he carefully stayed out of her space.

She’d done something with her hair. Pulled it away from her face and secured it with a large tortoiseshell clip. *Sexy as hell.*

At the end of the hall, he touched her shoulder. “This way.”

He liked the way she could change directions and not appear confused by the sudden switch.

The firing area was located in the sub-basement, two and a half floors beneath them. “Want to take the elevator? But, it’s quicker to use the stairs.”

“I’ll manage. Lead the way.”

Okay. She didn’t want small talk or any talk apparently. Jake took the stairs in his usual double time, and she was right behind him. He was impressed.

“How many rounds you want to fire?” Aw, shit. That look said he might get the first round. “I’ll sign for mine, then.” Man, she was making him feel pretty damned useless.

He didn’t wait on her, but began firing at the target in front of him. He was on his second quick load when she took her place in the spot next to him. Holy crap! She bent her knees and went for the kill shots, slamming fourteen slugs in the target’s head, chest, and

emptied the rest of her ammo in the gut area.

She glared at the torn up target and squeezed off the last shell into the unfortunate guy's groin. He gave her thumbs up when she finally glanced his way.

He waited while she took her brass to the ammo control desk. He no longer could question her ability to fire a weapon, so what did that leave? Oh yeah, the prep flight. He looked forward to putting Fontana in her place. Never was a female that could match his skills as a pilot.

## Chapter Six

Jessica worked through the morning without Jake mentioning the firing range. He'd obviously gotten the message she was in no mood for sexist remarks, and was too smart to ask questions.

She was grateful when the time came to work with the Federal Aviation agents, setting up a schedule and flight plan. Jessica had flown to South America before. The prospect of going again was no problem. The time of the flight did cause her some concern.

Jake eyed the time schedule and gave her a sidelong glance. She leaned over the maps to point to the northern coast of Nicaragua.

"This might be a little tricky at night. I'm not expecting LaGuardia, but are they putting out runway lights?"

Frank pointed to the ridiculously narrow and short landing strip. "They'll have adequate lamps out for you."

"Good enough." Hell! She was worried about plowing into a mountain more than the landing.

Her partner seemed to be concerned about the flight plan. He checked it over several times, then went back to look at it again. She stared at him when he finally looked her way.

He questioned the plan.

"Seems like we're taking a hell of a long way around to get there."

Frank nodded and then held up a thick volume with the word Regulations printed across the cover. "We have to gain consent to access the shorter route, and that wasn't available at the time we put the flight time and route together." He looked a little pissed off. "We take what we can get. We want that bastard in a net. The plan is firm."

Jessica took the book from Frank when he held it out to her. “If we conserve fuel and have a tailwind, we should be fine.”

“If and should.” Jake stood and looked closely at the map on the wall size screen. “We had better figure in the fact the wind velocity falls off considerably at night.”

Now that Jake sounded as if he were on board, Frank announced his next plan. “The Beech Craft is ready for a test run. Claypool and Fontana will take it up and let us know what needs to be done.”

Jessica was relieved to hear the mission plans were almost finalized. “Frank, are we flying today?”

The group leader had already started to leave the room, but stopped to answer her question. “Affirmative. Be prepared to take the test run.” He smiled at her. Bad sign. “Claypool is senior agent on this job.”

“Yes, sir.”

That meant she was to be his copilot. Just like all the male agents she’d worked with, Frank had doubt in her ability to keep up with the guys.

Whatever disappointment she felt, Jessica rose above it and went back to perfecting the plans.

As the day wore on, her facade of strength thinned. The disappointment and confusing thoughts of the night before returned to mess with her concentration. Her calm reserve went south when Jake questioned her intelligence.

“Fontana...see that line? It leads to nowhere but the Atlantic Ocean. Are you sure you’ve flown the South American route before?”

She bit the tip of her tongue to stop the choice dirty words she wanted to hurl at his head. *Bastard*. “Excuse me. That line leads to our landing strip. You’d see it if your fat thumb wasn’t in the way.” She stood, her chair scraping noisily on the tile floor. “I’m stepping out for a minute.”

Jessica found temporary quiet in the small side garden just outside the male dominated conference room. The area was far too neat to be

used much. A couple of benches under a rose arbor were the only amenities. The place was a perfect spot with ample privacy to do something foolish.

Looking over her shoulder, she took her cell phone from her slacks pocket and punched in Clare's phone number. She called herself lots of dirty names, hating the fact she was acting like one of those weak sisters that couldn't let go of a bad relationship.

That couldn't be her heart hammering like that, too loud for her to hear if he did answer. His voice was thin and words edged with hostility.

"Jess, I would have called you tonight." He actually huffed. "What do you want?"

The question burned in her brain. Why had she ever thought she loved this lousy tempered loser? "I only wanted to speak with you, Clare. To let you know I arrived." She gave it a final try. "How are you feeling? Is your back shaping up?"

She had to be mistaken, but had he had groaned and not discreetly?

"Jess, we need to talk."

"That's why I called, Clare."

"About us."

*Funny.* Her stomach didn't clutch into a painful knot and her eyes remained cool and clear. No damned way was she going to cry. She knew what he was going to say. "Go ahead, Clare. You have the floor."

She heard the clink of glass in the background before he covered the mouthpiece and spoke to someone with him. He was in a restaurant.

"Jess, I'll call you tonight. Right now isn't good for me."

"Clare?"

He'd hung up.

With careful deliberation, she closed the phone and put it back in her trouser pocket. Jessica wasn't accustomed to feeling shame in her

relationships with men. But, right now, her heart weighed like bricks in her chest and thudded like a frozen lump as the rush of humiliation settled down on her.

Jessica cursed under her breath. She hadn't heard his approach, but Jake had followed her, his step silenced by recently fallen rose petals on the walkway. She didn't want his company. Or, his smart-mouthed wisecracks.

"Checking in or checking up on him?" His macho comment scratched her desire to slug him.

"My private life is just that. Private."

"Sensitive subject, huh?"

"I signed on down here to work, not dish the dirt with my nosy partner."

"That's what I like about you, Fontana." Jake looked around and toed several petals near his foot. "You're always on, always ready with an answer."

"It doesn't matter what you like."

"Well, sure it does."

"That's your opinion."

"Here's the deal. Partners that get along don't get their partners killed near as often." He grimaced after looking at his watch. "That's a scientific fact."

Jessica wanted to remind him the damned watch was a dud. "Do you know how pathetic you sound?"

"Do I?" His smile was designed to melt the heart of any female looking for a man.

She wasn't, so the smile was wasted on her. "What do you think?"

The immediate subject was momentarily put aside. Jessica wasn't immune to the sweet perfume of the crimson roses climbing the arbor above her head.

The whole scene reminded her that she was a woman that loved sensuous things, silk sheets and champagne served in a bed of down pillows and toys of her choice.

Several petals fell onto her shoulder and the scent was heady. She brushed them off and looked at him where he stood checking the area out with a disinterested glance.

“First time I’ve been out here.”

She believed that. He was in all likelihood, the typical male, not interested in much outside of his job and next woman. “I’m not surprised.”

He came to stand in front of her, reaching out to take a petal from her hair. “What makes you say that?”

“Men don’t usually go for secret gardens and birds.” She would not back down no matter how wolfish his smile or how near he stood.

“That’s not true. You’ll find out that I’m a sensitive guy.”

“Sure.” She avoided eye contact with him. “How did I ever miss that?” Jessica turned to go back inside, but his hand on her arm stopped her.

“Most women see that right off.” He had the good grace to laugh at himself.

“Stop trying to melt my heart and let’s get that plane up in the air.”

“Hey, I’m liking you better all the time.”

They walked down the quiet hallway, and Jessica glanced at his profile several times. He finally caught her furtive glance.

“Okay, what were you really doing out there? Crying?”

He was teasing, and she liked that for some immature reason. “You’re a real clod. Actually, I was trying to think of ways to keep from making you cry, wise guy.”

His lips moved in a hint of a smile, reason enough to make her want to slug him, but she chose to be professional. “Let’s get back to work.”

There was time for a few more comments to let him know being the underling in the mission did not put her off. “Just to make sure there are no arguments when we get to the airfield, I’m piloting this run.” The blue of his eyes darkened to a stormy hue, his speculative



gaze measuring her worth. “You have any quarrel with that, Claypool?”

The tease was back in his deep voice. “You’re going to try to scare me.”

She laughed in her most sinister tone. “You want to skip the trial run?”

“I wouldn’t miss this.”

The sensuous scent of his cologne wafted from his warm skin, making his close proximity triply unnerving. She tried not to, but Jessica couldn’t miss noticing the strength of his hand that gripped the door handle.

He casually touched the small of her back and opened the conference room door for her. “You still have rose petals in your hair.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Only in the best possible way.”

\* \* \* \*

Jake went through the routine checklist with Fontana, taking the role of copilot. He didn’t mind. If she needed help, he’d be there to pull her bacon out of the fire.

He sat beside her, doing and saying all the correct things, but the crazy zing in his blood was far from regulations. Maybe he was low on sugar or too full of testosterone.

Playing with ideas like that was nuts. Jake tried to catch her doing something wrong to ease the tension in his muscles. Maybe he should wait until they were back to lay it on her. She might try to kick him out of the cargo door. No better time than now to let her know who was in charge.

“Fontana, you need to trim your flaps.”

The stare she gave him was good as a slap in his face. “Let me do my job, Claypool, and we’ll get along fine.”

“Not likely.” His mumbled quip drew an icy glare from her. Things were looking up.

He couldn't help it if his smile was smug. He looked forward to sharing some excitement with the caustic Fontana.

With nothing to complain about, Jake could only sit back and admire the smooth take off she executed with the plane. She handled herself and the Baron with ease and seemed to have forgotten he was onboard.

She took care of the detail work, checking fuel, altitude and once, even him. Once they were trimmed and flying level, she whipped out her leather bound notebook and began writing.

Jake made no secret of trying to read her scribble. “What did you say about me?”

She snapped the book shut. “How big is your ego?”

Teasing her was addictive. “Hell, Fontana. You're not fretting over the age difference thing, are you?”

He took the notebook and opened it to the last entry. Nothing but accounts on the planes performance and regulations.

He looked up to see her knowing smile. Her voice was laced with superiority when she spoke.

“Does it meet with your expectation, Claypool?”

“A mite skimpy on details.” Jake couldn't think of anything else once he'd noticed the perfect exposure of breast Fontana revealed each time she leaned over or turned to the side.

*Mind out of her bra.* He straightened his headphones and looked out the window. She ended the silence with her usual wit.

“You must be thinking dirty thoughts to be so quiet.” There was a definite smirk of superiority on her face.

“Not at all.” He didn't know if he liked her being able to read him so easily. He changed the subject to one that interested him. “So, what does your man do while you're off on a mission?”

“I don't ask him.”

“You’re not hooked up, are you?” He mentally high-fived himself for guessing her life situation.

“I’m not sure.”

“The guy in the picture?”

“Yeah.”

Jake thought it was time to change the direction of conversation. A woman thinking about another man wasn’t good company. Plus, she was still flying the plane.

He looked around the Spartan interior of the aircraft. “They did a number on this baby. Not even a Porta-Potty.” Jake got up, moving to the rear of the plane.

Something was in the air, and he couldn’t identify the aroma.

Fontana glanced back at him. “What’s going on?”

He nosed around in the area that had been a small galley. “Smell that? I think they missed some black tar.”

He went back to the cockpit and grabbed a flashlight. She turned to watch as he checked out the gutted plane. Noticing her intent stare, he pointed to her. “Just fly the plane.”

She obviously took him seriously that there could be a problem. Her voice was a level monotone when she spoke. “We’ll have the plane gone over again. No use taking chances.”

He dropped into the seat next to her. “It’s probably nothing.”

“It’s only nothing if you’re not five thousand feet in the air.”

Jake grimaced with renewed irritation at being partnered with Miss Know-it-all. This was going to be some kind of trip with a woman that thought she knew everything.

He glanced at her again, wondering if she was really hooked up with that guy or using his picture to discourage other men.

Being a true red-white-and-blue American male, he would have to test the waters. When they were back on solid ground.

## Chapter Seven

Jessica dreaded getting off the plane. She stared out at the heavy rain that washed over the cockpit windows. The rainstorm that had been only a threat was now a full-fledged thunderstorm complete with ground shaking lightning and crashing thunder.

After they taxied to a stop at the end of the runway assigned to them, the pounding rain on the windshield reminded Jessica of the misery waiting outside. She shrugged and turned up her collar.

“No use sitting here.”

Jake stared out at the rain, then at her. “You’re kidding.”

“You won’t melt.” She buttoned her sweater-vest over her journal. “Gee, I wish I had a coat or something.” She was a specialist at appearing defenseless and eyed him with all the piety she possessed.

He obligingly shrugged out of the coat and handed it to her. “I must be crazy.”

For a split second, she felt guilty. He looked so gallant leading the way off the plane without any kind of protection, for a second she wished she hadn’t taken his coat.

She wanted to get back on the plane after stepping out into a cold blast of rain and small debris that flew around their heads. He took her hand and ran toward the terminal. He slowed down and shouted his question.

“Where the hell did we park?”

She saw the welcome glow of lights from the terminal, urging him to hurry. “Let’s get out of this and then worry about the car!”

He gripped her hand and led the way through puddles and small rivers that rushed under their feet.

From beneath the jacket she held over her head, Jessica could see rainwater running swiftly across the concrete. Her shoes were ruined, and her slacks were soggy up to her knees.

Jake hugged her waist and moved her along at a faster pace. His laughter was unexpected and contagious.

“Fontana.” He bumped her hip with his. “Want to share that coat?”

“What? You think I’m crazy?”

They ran toward the blurred lights that were barely visible above a small door marked Private. She was breathless as Jake drew her to the door and opened it, pulling her inside the hallway.

They were gasping for breath and laughing, not moving apart in reserved coolness.

Instead, their bodies brushed lightly with no excuses or sudden separation.

She probably shouldn’t let his hand graze her cheek. How was she to respond negatively while suspended in a sweet, quiet net of misconduct? She gripped his wrist, swaying to and fro in the unfamiliar sensation.

Droplets of water fell from his hair and splashed onto her lips. She licked them, the moisture tasting like an exotic potion.

Her gaze traveled to his mouth. There was nothing boyish about his smile. Jessica was convinced her legs would cave when he touched his forehead to hers.

The overhead lights blinked, a signal from a higher power to break it up immediately.

“I think its time to find the car.” She removed his hands from her waist and handed him the dripping coat. “Thanks for the loan. I’ll have it cleaned for you.”

She had one last quick glance. Only a man could look that sexy while soaking wet.

In the deserted hallway, the fury of the storm was muted into a distant hum. Her eyes closed as he brushed raindrops from her cheek. He dropped his hand, and glanced around.

“We better get a hustle on.”

He moved away from her, raking his wet hair with his fingers. He looked uncomfortable.

“What’s wrong, Claypool? Does being alone with me make you nervous?”

“That’ll be the day.”

She’d hoped he’d taken that as friendly teasing. Stupid woman. His smoldering gaze dipped inside her most private feelings and needs.

She smoothed the wrinkled material of her slacks. “Hey, Claypool. I was just messing with you.”

He smiled speculatively at her before swinging his drenched coat over his shoulder. “Come on. Unless you have something else in mind.”

Well, of course she did, but her conscience kept reminding her she wasn’t free to make that move.

Thirty minutes later, Jessica shivered in the chilled air-conditioned conference room back at FBI Headquarters. Taking the waterlogged sweater vest off had been an error in judgment. Her nipples immediately peaked, and Jake couldn’t seem to keep his eyes in their sockets. The fabric of her blouse adhered to her breasts, making it impossible to cover the situation.

She headed for the washroom where she sat under the hand dryer for twenty minutes before going back to the conference room.

Something new buzzed in the air. Frank was in the room. That probably meant everything was cleared.

Jake handed her a copy of the latest fax on Azizi. “Looks like the short man has a fool that’s holding a dirty bomb for him.” He flicked the paper she tried to read. “He’s been offering a cool million to anyone willing to sell it to him.”

She sat down in the chair next to him and read the complete message, frowning at the total waste of human life. “Wouldn’t it be nice if he’d use that money to alleviate the poverty in his country?”

“No figuring a screwball like that.” Jake handed her a stack of black and white photos. “Lots of new photos of him and his jungle palace.”

She sorted through the pictures, pausing to study the stucco and tile hacienda. The place would be beautiful if it didn’t harbor a serpent.

Frank sat down and sipped the soft drink he’d brought with him. I read your report on the plane’s condition. Our mechanics are going over it right now.” He gave Jake a copy of their final orders. “You’re leaving here at 0600 hours.”

Jessica wasn’t nervous about the flight. Maybe a little, but a lot more nervous about being alone with Jake, and no claim to having a man to be true to. Get over yourself, woman. He’s not anymore interested in you than Clare is! You’re perfectly safe.

Frank startled her back into the present.

He looked at her then at Jake. “Do you have any questions? Concerns or gripes? This is your final briefing.”

Jessica glanced at Jake, and then shook her head. “I’m clear and ready to leave.

Just as she thought he would, Jake had a question.

“Is this weather supposed to be breaking before we take off?”

Frank shrugged. “The weatherman says the front will be out of here by then. We go fair or foul.” He got up and walked toward his office, turning to look back out at them before closing the door. “Good luck.”

Jake grabbed his jacket, turning to look at her. “Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

Jessica felt the usual lift in her blood pressure that hit each time she was going on a mission. Part of her wanted to engage Jake in

conversation, part of her said no. He wasn't the type to discuss feelings.

Conversation was sparse during the ride to her hotel. She stopped him at the elevator when it appeared he wanted to go further. His hand on her back skated upwards to caress the lobe of her ear.

She wasn't immune to the smoldering heat in his gaze or his invitation.

“Want company for dinner?”

“How about a rain check?”

He picked up her keys, dangling them on his fingers, their soft jingle pleasant, like his voice. “Sure you don't want me to check your suite for varmints?”

As much as she enjoyed the byplay, Jessica ended it. “I think it's fine.” Acting disinterested was almost impossible. “Goodnight, Claypool.”

The elevators opened, and she stepped inside. By the time she turned around, Jake was deep in conversation with a stunning blond in a scarlet dress.

She had wasted all that charm on a playboy. Served her right for the self-assured conceit she'd suddenly developed. Jessica, you're a fool.

By the time she had opened the door to her suite, all she wanted was a warm shower and someone to hold her. The thought didn't shock her. She had been experiencing the nagging need for weeks, and being around a male like Jake brought the hunger to the surface.

Her face was set into a hard grimace of distaste when she caught her reflection in the closet mirror. Hair hanging in limp strands and makeup smeared in comedic slashes around her eyes.

She'd hurriedly dried her face before leaving the washroom, not taking into consideration the water in her hair would play havoc as it dripped down to melt her makeup.

Was it any wonder Jake hadn't wanted to kiss her? Thank heavens he hadn't. In her mental condition, she would have loved it.



While she showered, Jessica remembered Jake's interest in her perfume. At least his appreciation of expensive things was fine-tuned.

The scent, a delicate and sensual apple blossom essence, had been designed for her while she was on a mission in Paris. Knowing a perfume manufacturer was a perk for a two-month assignment. He had taken a keen interest in her. Paris. She'd loved the place.

The shopping was fabulous, but her only contact with the male populace had been the creep she'd arrested for selling military secrets. As usual, her luck with men had been right on target. Then, she met Clare. Now, she had a new vacancy looming in her future.

Now, she had something new going on in her life. An itch for her partner. It had to stop. No matter what happened with Clare.

After her shower, she dressed in a short white wrap-skirt and red cap sleeved blouse. She piled her hair up on top of her head and secured it with a large pearl clip. Good enough. Too hungry to fuss, she dropped her weapon in her bag, and headed out for the dining room.

The dining room was crowded, and Jessica was ill at ease taking a table while couples waited.

She decided to hurry things up and ordered a piece of pecan pie and coffee. What a dinner. If it didn't do the trick, there was always the pizza place across the street.

While she waited for her food, Jessica looked around. A young couple with a baby, and across the way, an elderly couple laughed over a shared intimacy.

The dining room was pleasant and her corner table perfect for people watching. Her waitress brought her pie and coffee, giving Jessica a knowing smile before she hurried away.

*My God. She feels sorry for me.*

The pie was too sweet and the coffee tepid. Jessica resigned herself to eating a candy bar in her room. That was odd, that man coming through the dining room door looked familiar.

This was no mirage. Clare strode across the room toward her as if they were meeting in their favorite coffee shop in Seattle.

She observed him, waiting for the rush of some emotion. There was none. Maybe surprise.

He was a handsome man, tall and slender, with an air of sophistication about him. His Nordic good looks got plenty of stares from women, just as they were right now. She should feel something. She had never been jealous of him, so that was out.

He paused at the table. "Hello, Jessica." He touched the chair opposite her. "May I join you?"

She blinked to cover her surprise. "Of course. Sit." A choking thirst demanded water. She sipped from her glass. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm on my way to the polo matches in Sarasota."

"You're alone, or with the club?"

"Not alone and not with the club." He had a strange look of smugness on his face. "Larissa has taken me under her wing."

Jessica wanted to spit fire in his stoic face. "Larissa? Your best friend's wife?" She felt something now, wrenching disgust and anger, despising him as he spoke.

"I'm seeing to her safety until we reach Sarasota."

He didn't say it, but Jessica was certain this arrangement wasn't a new one. How big a fool had she been?

Calm deliberation was his trademark. He flicked at something on the tablecloth. "Is that your dinner?" He forced a slash of a smile. "Another bad choice."

The innuendos had begun. For the sake of civility, she kept her voice low. "You really don't want to go there."

He glanced around and grimaced. "You would actually prefer living like this to having my name and connections?"

"I like being a real warm-blooded woman with a life to be proud of." She leaned over to gaze into his eyes. "You don't want me as I am, and I'm never going to change."

He sighed. Wow. He must be feeling remorse. Her private moment of levity irked her. *Come on. Get it over with.* His face was screwed up like a prissy primary teacher now.

“I’m calling off our engagement, Jess. I warned you the Parcel Delivery thing had to stop.” She remembered hearing another voice in the background during their last phone call. A woman’s voice. “And, I don’t have to remind you of my feelings concerning the man’s job that’s robbed you of your femininity. I’m embarrassed to tell my friends about you.”

Her stomach clutched into a cold knot of humiliated anguish. He’d hit her with a cheap shot.

Jessica drew in a deep, calming breath to help her over the crevasse his despicable description of her had cut forever between them. *Stay focused, woman. No man is worth losing your place in life for.*

“You’ve thought about this for a while, haven’t you, Clare?” The silence on his side crackled. “It couldn’t have waited until we were back to Seattle?”

“And when would that be? You’re constantly leaving.”

“I always come home.”

“No need this time, Jess. It’s done.”

“Clare.”

A flicker of quiet preceded his killing insult.

“Don’t beg, Jess.”

Had she heard correctly? The calm reserve she’d struggled to maintain boiled over in a caldron of fury. “You’ve helped me make the decision that’s been eating me alive.” Another deep breath pushed her ahead. “I want you and everything of yours out of my home before I get back to Seattle. Do it, or I’ll kick both you and your junk down the stairs the minute I open the door.”

He huffed and hissed her name. “Jess. No need being so crass.”

She closed her mind to his voice and stood, digging his house key from her handbag, she tossed it at him. “Don’t bother returning my key. I’m ordering new locks be installed immediately.”

His stumbling stab at an apology went unheeded. “Jess, I really do regret this.”

“Just get out of my apartment and my life.”

“Be rational. People are staring.”

Jessica sank back down into her chair, quickly glancing around.

She was out of breath. She wanted to slap the superior expression from his face. But, someone was intently watching her from a phone booth alcove a few steps away.

She couldn’t have been happier to see Jake saunter toward their table. He looked calm and clean in his heather-tweed sport coat and white shirt. Jeans. Every man should dress like that.

She was staring like a drugged fool, noticing he had tried to tame his spiked hair, but hadn’t succeeded.

With the confidence of royalty, Jake sat down next to her and took a bite of her pie. He wasn’t fooling her. He’d obviously overheard every childish syllable of the argument.

Clare eyed Jake with open distaste. “And who is this person?”

His affected speech amused her partner. “I’m her partner. Her go-to man.” The hand he held out was ignored. “Jake Claypool.”

Clare stood, picking up the key she’d tossed at him and handed Jessica her apartment key. “I regret it ended this fashion.”

She turned her head to avoid the kiss he tried to brush on her cheek. “Good-bye, Clare.”

Remembering she wasn’t alone, she looked up. Her partner wasn’t smirking or grinning. He gazed at her with his clear blue eyes, and waited.

“Buy me a drink, sailor?” Her comment was so out of character she laughed. “See how far I’ve sunk since being dumped?”

“You’ve got moxie.” His voice had that nice soft gravelly sound.

“I’ve got what?”

“Moxie. You know.” He looked down at his crotch, then back at her. “Balls.”

“Not really. He kicked me pretty hard.”

“Well, you got in a few great left hooks.” Jake studied her, in no hurry to leave. “When I got here, you were pretty into the fight. Didn’t sound like a hot date, so I figured you wouldn’t mind my company.”

She suddenly remembered who she was and where she was. “I didn’t need help, Claypool. The big bad wolf is gone.”

He touched her wrist. “This is where I kiss you passionately, isn’t it?”

“Is there any other way?” What on earth was wrong with her?

“Not with me.”

“Don’t feel sorry for me, Claypool.”

He sat back, surveying her with a half smile. “What made you choose a guy like that?”

“What does that mean?” Hell, she knew what he meant.

“He’s a pantywaist.”

“Sophisticated.”

“Sissy.”

“He’s not what you expected?”

“Hell no. He didn’t look like a stupid man. What’s his real problem?”

“You’re being insensitive and nosey.”

Jake tapped her thumb as he talked. “I’ll tell you what happened to my marriage.” He gave her a quick glance. “My wife thought what I do is degrading. See. I know what being ‘let go’ feels like.”

She grimaced, wishing he hadn’t seen the mess. “In case you didn’t hear, it was a mutual break, partner.”

Jake’s expression was now his best. Flirty and too sexy to believe. “If you don’t need my sympathy, I’ve got something better.”

She felt ill at ease and lost. “Nice, Claypool.”

“Just being neighborly.” He covered her hand with his. “Want to neck?”

The devil blazed in his blue eyes, suggestive and playful.

“No. I’m going to my room.” She stood and dropped her napkin over the pie. “Coming?”

## **Chapter Eight**

How far was too far? This seemed like the place. Jake followed her to the elevator and shut the door before anyone else could get on. That was probably a good sign she'd gone over the line in baiting him.

She remembered foolishly looking at him as a fun little diversion to tease while assigned to Dallas. Now it appeared as if he was going to prove her secret meanderings valid. Jake Claypool would be anything but a little diversion.

Jessica glanced at her partner and drew in a steady breath. She didn't bother trying to convince him she was simply being cordial.

"I have a box of candy upstairs."

His attention was riveted on her mouth. "The good stuff?"

"Chocolate cordial cherries."

"Yeah?" He caught the fold of her skirt between his fingers. "I like candy."

The warm air in the elevator crackled with tension. She breathed in the heady mixture of their scents, exotic and exciting.

Her nerves were tight, ready to snap. If he touched her, it would become a tryst in a small space. Bodily injury was inevitable.

He easily read her body language and moved her to the nearest corner, bracing his hands on either side of her.

"You called, ma'am?"

"My, you're fast."

Her eyes refused to stay open in a fog, laden with the sweet drug of passion. It swept her up in its wings, stealing her ability to reason or speak. Why would she say no when all she wanted was Jake?

Slightly, and ever so subtly, his hips touched hers, warming her rain-chilled skin.

The rush of warmth he infused in her body was breathtaking. He barely grazed her neck with his lips and nuzzled her burning earlobe, adding hot sensuality with a soft tug of his teeth. She was aflame.

Jessica didn't remember lifting her arms to lock her hands behind his back. Shouldn't she say something? No need. Her quick gasp said all he wanted to know.

Far away, a familiar sound brought her out of the lovely haze. "I believe someone's wanting the elevator."

"I don't hear a thing." He kissed the sensitive length of her neck until her thighs quivered. "I can hear your heartbeat, baby."

She didn't doubt him. "What should I do about that?"

Crazy question, woman. He was taking care of it with his nice, capable hands.

"Ummm. Fontana, you're the best smelling woman I've ever known." He added a bit more pressure, leaving no doubt he was sporting a huge rack of horns for her.

Her knees would have buckled if he hadn't been holding her up. It had been so long since she'd been held in an embrace of raw passion, and she knew she'd give in to anything he wanted.

She slid her hands under his jacket, memorizing the wonderful, firm, warm muscle beneath, the scent of clean skin. Jake's blood ran hot too. No longer trying to resist, her hips plied to his.

In the far off recesses of her mind, she knew there was another world, but couldn't go back. Not yet. His lips brushed over hers until she opened her mouth, inviting his kiss. Firm lips slashed across hers, demanding and hungry, taking her breath, leaving her helpless and needy in his arms.

His hand on her breast jolted Jessica into full awareness. "Jake...you're getting pretty damned friendly."

He only pulled her closer, murmuring in his husky, cowboy accented voice. "Your gun's in my way."



Heaven help her. She couldn't help herself.

"That's funny. Yours isn't bothering me a bit."

"Forget that part for now. I'll take another route."

He wasn't just talk. She clawed at his back, trying to stay on her feet. How was she to do that when his hand was between her legs and roving over her thighs, checking her out like a prize filly? Whatever he did was okay with her.

He'd reached the point of no return now, and the elastic of her panty leg offered no resistance, letting his exploring fingers slip into dangerous territory.

Control got away from her, leaving Jessica with nothing but the desire to see the moon and stars spin off in a fiery explosion. "I can't stand it any longer." She whimpered in delicious agony. "Clare!"

\* \* \* \*

What the hell? Jake didn't mind a woman not caring if she ever saw him again, but she damned well better scream his name and not some other guys. Pulling away, he straightened her blouse and hit the floor selection panel.

He stood away from her, jamming his shirttail back into his jeans. She appeared confused and damned frustrated.

"What's the matter with you?"

He gazed at her with some reproach. "I'm not Clare."

Her eyes that had been rounded with shock were now filled with anger aimed directly at him.

"You stopped because I said Clare's name?"

"Oh, hell yes. If the shoe was on the other foot, you'd be emptying your weapon in my hide!"

She seemed to recover nicely and vented her frustration in a clear voice.

"You think too much of yourself, Claypool. What did you think was going on here? We're not exclusive by any means."

Her words bothered him more than he wanted to admit. But he wasn't going to let her know he was twice as disappointed as she was. Worse, her delectable perfume slipped through his veins, depositing a raging, lingering passion.

He remained cool, calm, and it was all a lie.

"You really want to know what I think?" He straightened the collar of his jacket. "You need to get back with your fiancé. Obviously, it isn't over for you."

He waited for her to leave the elevator first when the doors opened to her floor. Three young studs waited at the door, staring at Fontana with their tongues hanging out.

Poor fools thought they were just another horny couple hurrying to her room for a hot romp. Until now, he'd never met a woman like her, so he didn't blame the guys for thinking like that. Brother, they had a lot to learn. She struck out at him when he tried to take her key.

"I don't need an escort."

"Whatever happened between us, I still walk a lady to her door."

"How sweet." She slashed her key card through the lock. "Don't get the idea I need you for protection, or anything else. Period!"

She was so near, he could touch her. Not after what had just happened.

While she shoved the door open, he attempted to talk to her. "I'll come by for you in the morning."

"No. You won't." She let her resentment fly. "I realize you have a problem following through, but try not to keep me waiting at headquarters in the morning."

\* \* \* \*

Jake hadn't slept well after the incident with Fontana. His head hurt, and he felt like a dirty heel. He never took advantage of a woman on the rebound. Especially not her.

If they ever did have sex, he'd have to be the only thought in her head. Damn! He couldn't stop thinking about her, or the way her soft lips clung to his, seeking something extraordinary and sensual.

Now, they would be in close contact for thousands of miles, with days of eating and sleeping in close confines. This was going to test his mettle to the limit. He must be paranoid to be having recurring doubts about her watching his back.

*Hell, Claypool, you're losing it over this woman. She's an agent. Your partner.*

He conducted himself in a civil manner while they packed their meager belongings into the plane's lockers. Effort wasted when she barely acknowledged his existence on her arrival to headquarters, signing in without looking his way.

"Is that everything, Fontana?"

"Yes."

They hadn't had a minute alone and now that they were, his tongue thickened and he now had four thumbs and four left feet. His mind wouldn't get back to normal. She'd put a hex on him. He'd check with her later.

"Let me secure your bag, Fontana."

Her dark eyes quickly shuttered and she looked away.

"I've got it." The way she carefully closed the locker door fit her. Cool and sure.

He waited until she plopped her tote down beside her seat to begin a conversation. Or, make the attempt. "Before we get airborne, I want to get back to at least a professional relationship. What I said..."

"No need bringing that up, Claypool." She fit the headphones down over her ears and flipped several switches. Let's get this started. We have an animal to take down."

"Certainly, ma'am." Jake admitted to himself he'd look a lot smarter if he stopped courting her and concentrated on flying the plane. But, she had the look of a woman wanting to be told how sorry he was for being a jerk.

Along with that, he figured the friendly voice from the control tower would be the last he'd hear for a while if he didn't make the effort.

At the end of the runway, he glanced at his copilot. She entered data in the logbook, seemingly interested in anything and everything but him. He didn't miss the slanted glance she sent his way.

Don't get too excited. She may be planning to cause you some pain.

Jake felt great relief and jubilation as the plane lifted and quickly gained altitude. The sooner they got to Nicaragua and back, the quicker they could get back to a normal life. If he had any luck at all, Ms. Fontana would be in a more receptive mood before she went to Seattle.

Right now, they had to stick together just to stay alive. He hoped she wasn't so ticked off at him she'd let him eat lead.

From the corner of his eye, he saw her fiddling with the pocket of her OD jacket. Man, she looked sweet as honey in her black cargo pants and gray T-shirt.

She glanced at him, arching her fine dark brows and lifting her shoulders. "What?"

Like a leering opossum in a trap, he'd been caught ogling her while remembering her passion.

"Nothing."

*Idiot!*

He looked out the window and mentally kicked his own ass. Still randy as a pasture bull.

From that point on until they refueled in Miami, he maintained an easy line of conversation with her, careful to say nothing to piss her off.

He reboarded ahead of her, still drinking his cola when she climbed back into the plane.

Unable to control his line of crap, he almost laughed at his own klutzy remark.

“I picked up some candy bars for later.”

“Why?” She shot a knowing, amused look his way. “You don’t plan on expending an unexpected burst of energy. Do you?” She gestured toward the tarmac. “Is something on your mind?”

*Damn.*

“Not a thing, ma’am.”

He finished his soft drink and tossed the damned candy bars in the satchel between their seats. She opened her tote bag and laid a quart of water inside, then zipped it securely.

Jake kicked himself mentally for being absolutely hypnotized by the lovely head next to him. Everything she did was exquisite elegance, and he still burned for her. He didn’t enjoy defeat. He’d been crazy to make a noise about her saying that other guy’s name.

An hour later, he was willing to risk a flogging and asked questions he’d have never ask a casual date. He was curious about her life.

“You never did tell me how you ended up with the FBI.”

She stared at him as if he had asked for a loan until payday. “I expect the same way you did.” Her journal held her gaze. “I went to Arizona University, then on to the military.”

She looked away. He was pretty sure that she was hoping he didn’t ask about her fiancé. Okay, try another subject.

“You from a big family? Any kids?”

“No brothers or sisters and never married.”

He nodded, pleased to see her icy veneer melting away. There were a lot of miles to cover, and he didn’t want to be on her crap list any longer.

For their comfort and safety, he made an offer he thought she couldn’t refuse. “If you’re tired, I’ll stand first watch.”

“Thank you, no.” She kept her eyes on the dials.

Well, that was better. Jake tested the waters again.

“Can I say something, Fontana?” She had a beautiful sultry smile that grabbed him in all the sensitive places.

“Is this business or bull?”

“You’re the most evil female I’ve had the pleasure to meet!” The woman had the ability to make him randy as hell and pissed him off at the same time. A real dangerous combination. Right now, he was being dangled like a puppet in the memory of her sweet smelling, smooth skin.

After a few minutes, he couldn’t let it alone. “How’s the oil pressure?”

That caught her attention and she checked the gauges. “It’s perfect. What’s up?”

He gestured over his shoulder. “I’m still catching that smell that was in here yesterday.”

Her eyes narrowed, no longer lobbing arrows at his hide. “I picked up on that, too.”

Since she was aware of the odor, he became more concerned. “Probably a good idea if we stayed on top of things. You know, until we land.”

She didn’t look worried, just alert to possible trouble. “I’ll make a run-through check.”

Not waiting for him to answer, she got up and went to the rear of the plane. Jake glanced back to see her searching the under seat storage.

“Anything?”

“Nothing unusual.” He shook his head as she yanked several large items from the low storage bins.

She lugged the stuff to the front of the plane. He recognized what they were, and teased her.

“Parachutes?” He chuckled.

“Laugh, funny man, but you’d be the first to scream for one if the need arose.”

“Right.” He made sure his grin was kept under wraps. “Want to check the route? The curve is coming soon.”

She made several notations in the log and checked the dials. “It will still be dark when we reach our destination.”

Jake got the idea she might be pretty concerned about the planes stability. But then, she yawned. So much for her being worried.

## Chapter Nine

They made good time. No headwind, clear sky, and moonlight for ambiance. Jessica was hungry, and visions of good South American food danced in her brain. A big plate of rice and beans for starters. She licked her lips.

Minus thirty minutes and they would touch down in Managua, Nicaragua.

Jake was tired if she read his mannerisms correctly. He yawned several times and worked his broad shoulders, then rubbed his eyes. After he checked the weather, he ate one of his calorie ridden candy bars.

“You consume enough sugar for three people.” She had planned to make a more cutting remark, but was dissuaded by the dark blue of his eyes and that wild hair of his.

He smiled at her, and Jessica leaned toward him, staring at the dab of chocolate in the corner of his mouth. His tongue lapped out at the sweet, and her lips quivered.

“You okay, Fontana?”

She suddenly realized she was very okay. Being with him blanked out most of the feelings of inadequacy and filled the quiet longing for a mate.

Jessica could almost forget the embarrassment of last night. But not completely. He’d planned to use her vulnerability and then ruined the passionate moment with lame jealousy. She didn’t argue with the tingle of awareness his nearness shot through her system. But she could irritate him in retaliation. And she would.



“Why did you get so bent out of shape last night?” She forced a short laugh. “Did you think I was serious about sleeping with you?” Her smile was chiding. “Well. Did you?”

He patted her thigh and nodded, wiping his mouth. “You were serious as a heart attack.”

“I’ll remember how gullible you are, Claypool.”

“Not gullible, lady. Just experienced.”

He was a smart-ass with far too much sex appeal. The way he dressed, comfortable, slightly tattered jeans, a sapphire blue cotton shirt over a dark blue T-shirt looked totally *GQ* on him. Plus, he smelled incredible.

But not that good. There was a lesson to be learned here, and she was the professor.

“I don’t suppose you have any kids. An experienced man like you.”

He drank from his water bottle and then grinned at her. “You must be getting bored.”

“Yes. I am.” She slowly folded the wrapper from his candy bar. “I don’t want to sound like a hysterical female, but it seems to me the scent of burning wire has intensified.”

He swung around to face her, all teasing vanished. “Why the hell didn’t you mention this earlier?” Jake grabbed her hand and clamped it down on the controls. “Take over.”

“I’m not the pilot.” She waved off his attempt to keep her in her seat. “Stay where you are.” Jessica took over the flashlight anxious to have a look for herself.

The acrid smell wasn’t her imagination. It was stronger in the tail section. She coughed and pulled a plate off a circuit board that had once supplied life to a refrigerator and coffeepot.

She flipped the overhead light off and shined the beam on the exposed wiring. “Damn.” The sight of curling gray smoke sent a shock wave through her. “We’ve got a problem, Claypool.”

“How bad?”

“Well, is smoking wiring bad enough?”

“Get up here and take over!”

“I can handle this.”

“Get your ass up here. Now!”

She went to the front and handed him the flashlight and then took over the controls. “I don’t know how deep it goes.” She moistened her dry lips. “We have that extinguisher, but I don’t think it’s enough to kill the whole snake.”

“Give me a break, Fontana.” He glanced to the rear and shook his head. “Keep your mind on getting us to Managua in one piece.”

She couldn’t resist looking back when he ripped a slab off the wall. The stench was becoming unbearable. It looked like he was emptying the entire contents of the extinguisher into the wiring. She coughed, trying to cover her mouth and nose with her shirt.

He checked around in the tail section for sometime, watching the area before coming back to the front. He didn’t look happy, and that made her nervous.

“Jake, what’s the situation?”

“It’ll hold.” He glanced back and exhaled roughly. “I’ll take over. You keep an eye out for trouble.”

“What do you mean, it’ll hold?” She couldn’t sit and wait. Jessica had to investigate what he’d done.

Her concern wasn’t assuaged by his decision to drop their altitude. That meant he foresaw a possible bailout. She simply wouldn’t sit still while they hurtled toward their demise.

Nosing through cupboards and lockers, she found exposed wires and loose fiberglass insulation. She wasn’t surprised that her heart flipped and stopped at the sight of smoke seeping through the cracks in the flooring. It rose like an ominous vapor.

“How did those guys miss this?”

Jake yelled back to her. “What? What’s going on?”

“We have more than smoke, Claypool. We have fire.”

“Okay. Get back up here!”

No questions, no resistance. She followed orders. Jessica was scared and ready to work as a team to get out of this mess.

He caught her hand when she sat down, tension obvious in his terse and gruffer tone.

“We can’t stay in this fire trap.” He tried the radio again. The thing merely crackled like dry foil paper. “Damn it. We aren’t able to let the FBI or the airfield know our location.”

She figured out their position with her instruments. “What’s the plan?” She quickly wrote an update in her logbook and stuffed it into one of the leg pockets of her cargo pants.

He took the flashlight. “We don’t have any choice. We jump.”

Almost as one, they secured their weapons in their holsters. She dropped a small knife and a compass in the other pockets of her pants. She ignored his glower as she ran her belt through the handles of her tote bag and fastened it around her waist.

He took off his long-sleeved shirt and thrust it at her.

She knew why he wanted her to wear it, but she would rather freeze than know he was suffering because of her. “What are you doing? You’ll need this!”

He shook his head. “You’ll need it more.” After setting the plane on autopilot, he pulled her onto her feet. “Let’s get ready to rumble, baby.”

She almost choked on worry when the weight of the chute lay on her shoulders. He buckled her up and snapped her satchel onto her drop line.

Her heart chugged harder while helping him with his chute. He appeared calm enough, but his eyes were dark with worry.

A new concern jolted her. “Who packed these chutes?”

Jake gave her a quick smile and roughly patted the front of her chute. “Does it matter? Don’t worry about it.”

“But, I can’t...”

She didn’t finish her thought, surprised when he gripped the chute’s harness.

“Come here.” He pulled her to him, cradling her head in his hand, kissing her hard. There was teasing in his eyes when he broke the kiss. “I want that back.”

He tried the radio once more. Still nothing. Jessica handed him a pair of safety goggles and put on hers. He was so awesomely superior over all other men she’d been with. Her heart was suddenly too full to beat.

He looked around the cabin, then at her. She once again worried about his safety. “You’re going to freeze, not to mention being cut to shreds by the trees. Take this shirt back.”

“Forget it.” He swatted her rear. “Let’s go.”

The aircraft was being engulfed by smoke as it began a slow decent.

She followed Jake to the cargo door and held on to a steel pole while he unlatched it. The heavy metal flew off and disappeared into the cold unknown.

“Jake. Wait!”

He couldn’t hear her over the cold rush of wind and grabbed her arm, shouting. “I’ll follow you out.”

She balked. “No. I want to make sure you get out.”

He shook her. “Don’t be crazy. You go now or we don’t make it.”

“Okay, damn you.” Tears of stress streamed unnoticed down her cheeks.

“Fontana. I’ll find you. Wherever you land, baby. I’ll find you.” He pushed her to the door. “Wait for me down there.”

“I will.” She gripped his hand a final time. “Don’t lose me Claypool.”

“Never happen, honey.”

There was no more talk, no more safety of being with Jake.

She was falling through the night. Alone.

## Chapter Ten

He'd heard her yell a "boo-yah" as she jumped from the plane. He'd been able to keep her chute in sight until the wind flipped him upside down.

That's when he lost most of the supplies he'd jumped with. The wind shear tore at his clothes and face until losing his entire hide was not entirely out of the question. Thank God Fontana had thought of the goggles, or he'd be blind by now.

He was cold, and if he lived, it'd be the last time he shivered. His own misery brought Fontana to mind and made him extremely anxious about her.

Would the damn fall ever be over? His question was answered at forty miles an hour when he connected with a sturdy tree. Fortunately, it was topped with springy, leaf padded limbs.

Off in the distance, he saw their plane run headlong into a cliff, burst into flames and fall apart. They hadn't bailed out a minute too soon. His desire to sleep was stronger than his resistance for few seconds. Staying awake was going to be really important, especially until he found his partner. Unceremoniously, he passed out, unaware of the hunting cat that watched him with its green stare.

He had no idea how long he'd been out before he regained full capacity. Jake pulled out of his painful fog, slowly alerted to a cold nose nuzzling his bloody cheek.

"Hey!" For a single painful heartbeat, Jake stared into the face of a savage beast. A margay to be precise. The damned cat was small by jaguar standards, but could rip his face off with no trouble. He sucked in air and yelled like a madman. Cry with relief is what he wanted to

do after the spotted animal turned and scampered along the limbs with all the grace and no fear of a housecat.

His blood poured through his veins in furious torrents after being frozen by shock and downright fear.

He began to recount the earlier events. The fire. The jump. Fontana!

He fought his way out of the chute and tangle of lines. *Get out of this tree, fool!*

Shooting pain in his left shoulder reminded him that she could be badly injured. He had to hurry and locate her.

He worked his way out of the nylon prison and freed himself from the precarious cradle only to fall through a punishing gauntlet of limbs and vines until he plummeted to the forest floor.

He landed on something that must have broken several ribs. Feeling under his back, Jake pulled his flashlight out and forgot his cracked ribs. The flashlight was the only thing that hadn't been lost in his freefall.

Adjusting his vision to the darkness took time. But, his hearing was perfect. Things were moving around in the underbrush, and that meant hunting a meal.

On his feet, Jake tried to sort out the different sounds. Birds, cats, and things he couldn't identify.

Filtered moonlight leaked through the heavy overhead canopy, but it was more curse than blessing. The light moved in crazy patterns, brightening the path for a mere few seconds, then skittered off.

Listening for any sound that could lead him to Fontana, he quieted his breathing and urge to groan in pain.

*Come on, baby. Talk to me.*

Nothing. She wasn't the type to scream if she was hurt or afraid no matter where she was. If she could make a sound.

*Fontana, where are you?*

A crust of moss on the lower trunks of the trees gave him a direction to shoot for. He walked in the way he thought was south, stumbling over vines that twisted across the forest floor.

He looked to the canopy above his head before he went on. She could be hanging up in a tree as well as be on the ground.

Thirty long minutes later, Jake stopped looking. He couldn't help the growing worry in his gut. Worry, hell. He was scared. Thinking of her being hurt, bleeding, and maybe crying. Or worse, unable to call for help.

Never too wary of animals, Jake had to recoil after coming face to face with a large bearded lizard draped over a low limb across the narrow trail.

The creature was in no hurry to give up his residence, peeing off the branch to make sure Jake got the message. He made a small detour. Stepping off the path, he caught the sound of trickling water. That brought back the image of Fontana carefully laying a water bottle in her tote. She'd be thirsty by now.

He moved ahead, his flashlight splashing a beam up into the trees. A shower of leaves from the canopy stopped his progress. He automatically checked his weapon, not wanting another encounter with that cat.

The Glock was in his fist, and he looked up, waiting. Nothing but more leaves and a dead calm, which usually meant trouble.

\* \* \* \*

For a time, Jessica couldn't identify anything around her. She was lying on her back in a bed of sharp stones. The air smelled of rain and a strong musky scent of dried leaves. Something heavy tugged on her leg. Someone was trying to pull her down. Down! She had jumped from an airplane, and if the pain in her hip was real, she'd lived.

She could almost hear Jake's gruff voice as he yelled at her to wait for him. Jake! While she had been daydreaming, he could be

hanging onto life somewhere in this dark, tangled world. The memory of their plane crashing into a cliff gripped her heart.

Did he get out in time?

She flailed her arms and clenched her teeth. She couldn't scream. Too risky. Her legs dangled, giving her the feeling of being in a baby swing. Damn it. Frustration swept through her, and she fought with the tangle of chute and harness holding her prisoner.

She felt her weight sliding down before drawing her legs up against the sharp pain. A scream of anger worked its way to her throat, but she beat it down. No yelling. No call for help. No nothing.

Fear of expiring in this damned narrow, rocky ravine outweighed her concern of being discovered by one of Azizi's henchmen.

Dawn would be breaking soon if she read the sounds and feel of the air correctly. Oh great, her watch was gone, and Jake's didn't work half the time.

Jake! The desire to whine was foolish, but Jessica knew being lost in this place meant certain death.

*Stop it! Use your head. Not your emotions.*

She shivered from the cold. The altitude was radically different than the warmer, lower regions, and her clothing wasn't adequate for the temperature.

Adding to her discomfort was the tote bag hanging from her waist. The bag had slid downhill, pulling on her bruised leg. Or was it her hip? She couldn't tell.

Somewhere between landing and being fully conscious, she'd tossed her goggles away. She regretted it immediately. Insects flew around her face, driving her crazy. In despair, she crossed her arms over her face and whispered a short prayer her mother had taught her.

She dozed, jolted from her nap by the flapping of wings that could raise the dead. A group of scarlet Macaws were roosting in the crevasse of the jutting rocks above her. They obviously weren't happy with their new roommate.

"Shoo, you buggers."



The birds flew off, still squawking, probably upset by the early hour.

*Claypool! Where are you?*

She thought she was hallucinating when a bobbing light in the distance caught her attention. No, no vision. That beautiful glow meant rescue.

Jake. Coming for her like the Texas lawman he was.

She could see him now, looking around, flashing the beam into the trees and undergrowth. Finally, he noticed the rocky trail below her.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” Her voice broke. She didn’t care.

He looked up, his smile welcome in the bright light of the flashlight. “Well, are you coming down, or do I have to come up there?”

This was her man all right. Not the reception she’d dreamed up, but she’d take it. “That will be hard to do, owing to the fact that I’m twisted in here like I was hit by one of your Texas cyclones!”

He laughed, not harsh, just under his breath. “Did you make a clean landing?” His way with words lacked sympathy. She wouldn’t ask for any.

“I’m not sure.” She lifted her legs to test their fitness. “My hip’s bruised pretty good.”

He was already working his way up to her. Seeing him getting closer was equivalent to her favorite blanket on a freezing night.

Jake was directly below her, reaching up to tug on her pants leg to take the knife she’d slipped into her pocket.

“I’ll cut the satchel free and come on up.” He touched her foot. “I’m still amazed you didn’t take a nosedive in the dirt with that sinker you’re wearing.”

He was going to cut the satchel off! “Don’t drop it!” She panicked at the thought of losing the water.

“I won’t drop it.” He quickly pulled the lines to him and knotted them into one dangling line, holding the tote. “I’ll send it down before we work our way out of here.”

She held back the barrage of questions that tingled on her tongue, and watched him work. Until she couldn’t stand it. “Do you still have the compass?”

“Yep.” She dropped down a few feet, and he pulled her back. “Are you doing all right?”

She nodded her head.

Jessica was dying to complain about her bruised hip, but clamped her lips over a cry of pain. She breathed deeply and closed her eyes, listening to the clink of harness rings and hooks. He worked quickly, bringing draglines together and pulling her chute free of the rocky outcrop.

He patted her head, and then set to work using the lines to secure her to his back. Time to ask questions.

“What are you doing?”

“Ask me later.”

The man was crazy, taking the hill like a Commando and doing it fast.

She clung to him with one desire in her heart. Live!

Her scream trailed off behind them, ending immediately on impact of hitting the ground.

“No screaming!” Jake rolled with her, quickly clamping his hand over her mouth. “If any of Azizi’s goons are within ten miles of here, you just sent them an invitation to cut our throats.”

“You haven’t heard me scream yet!” The landing had been rough and she felt dopey, bellowing like a child. She wasn’t afraid of anything. Except looking foolish in front of Jake.

“Let’s go, and damn it, be quiet.”

“I’ll be quiet, but I don’t see any way of getting up.” She rocked her hips. “How soon do you plan to release me, sir?”

“Knock off the phony Southern belle crap.” He took his time moving and talked quietly as he dragged her chute to him and began pulling it into a pile. “What’s wrong?”

No use being noble. “My hip. I think it’s only a deep bruise.”

He knelt by her side, unceremoniously examining her for injuries. She groaned when he pressed his fingers into the flesh of her left buttock.

“Is it bad?”

“Bad enough.” She stood up and promptly fell to her knees. She crawled to the parachute and curled into its folds. “Give me a minute.”

Jake stood looking around, hands on his hips. “You’ll need more than a minute.”

He walked away a few yards, and that action worried her. “I’ll get up.” She struggled to stand on her feet. “I’m ready.”

He turned around and shook his head. “You’re ready to fold like a paper umbrella.” His quick stride saved her a fall. “I’ll make you a tent for the rest of the night.”

“But we need to get going. Our target won’t stay put forever, and he’ll kill the ambassador before dragging him around.”

“You’re not going anywhere on the leg.” Lifting her up in one arm and grabbing the chute, he carried her to the cover of several low growing trees. “I’ll have you fixed up in a couple minutes.”

Jessica couldn’t deny she welcomed the attention. The bruise on her hip burned like fire, and the nasty scratches all over her body delivered a fierce sting.

Her attempts to aid him in gathering grass to make a bed were limited to getting in his way. She hated the frustration of being moved aside.

Okay, she’d help him drape the chute over the low branches.

“Stop it, Fontana.”

“Okay.”

He folded the excess material inside and under the limbs, preparing a pretty decent place to rest. Still, she hesitated, unsure of him now. This was no place to have a brawl.

“Come on. Get in out of the cold?”

The time had come to show her gracious side.

“After you, Claypool.”

“What?”

“Want me to spell it out. Come in with me?”

He crossed his arms over his chest and gazed at her in a calm, assessing manner. “What’s up?”

She hated appearing less than job worthy, but she hobbled to where he stood. “You’re from Texas. Figure it out.”

Too sore to pretend at being tough, Jessica shivered and looked longingly at the flimsy bungalow he’d made.

He lifted the flap of the entrance. “Go ahead. I’ll stand guard until full daylight.”

She caught his shirttail and playfully tried to pull him inside the shelter. “I don’t bite.”

“Yes, but you’re hot, good-looking, and one hell of a kisser.” He yanked the flap down. “That’s why I’m staying out here.”

## Chapter Eleven

At daylight, Jake walked back to the stream he'd found earlier, bathing in the cold water while small primates observed from the trees. One even had the balls to throw a handful of rotten fruit down at him. A few minutes later, they took off, obviously bored watching him wash his dirty hide.

Every scratch and cut on his body burned like wasp stings, not to mention how hollow his empty stomach felt. Damn, he could sure use a cup of hot coffee right now.

He dried with his shirt, combing his hair with his fingers. At the moment, he wasn't concerned with his looks. He was worried. Downed in a wild country with no provisions. Fontana's leg would be another slowdown.

He'd checked on her several times, nearly coming unglued with the way her hands found all his vital parts. He'd carefully turned her onto her uninjured hip and crawled out of the tent.

He had leaned against one of the trees holding the contraption up, and tried to sleep. It had been useless while insects crawled up his nose and in his ears. Not to be outdone, the primates were having a gang war.

Plus, he'd heard thunder in the mountain range. They didn't need mud to contend with, not with cutthroats searching nearby for them. He'd heard the sounds, human sounds. Clinking of metals, laughter, and gunfire. Had to be drug dealers or Azizi's men.

He quickly tied his shoelaces, grabbing his damp shirt, and hurried back to their temporary shelter.

Worry rippled through him, quickening his stride to a fast trot. He was in a world of hurt. Probably never reach the diplomat in time to save his life, and not about to leave his partner behind. Yep, a world of hurt.

He exhaled with relief. The lean-to was as he'd left it, and she was probably still fast asleep inside. He began to breathe easier. Throwing the flap aside, he looked in the hooch.

Damn it!

She was gone.

That's what the worst of his worried feeling had been. Where in the hell was she? He was consumed with Technicolor images of her being dragged off by savages in headhunting mode.

Headhunters! That is crazy. He pitied the fool trying to cart her off. Then why was he running?

He wanted to shout out her name, but a sixth sense warned him to be quiet. He'd been right to be concerned. Baritone voices carried to him on the light breeze from less than a mile away through the dry forest.

The plane? They'd seen the fireball last night and figured out their location. So soon? That meant their instruments had been off all along and they would probably have run out of fuel before they landed.

He looked in all directions, listening intently for any sound she might make. Glancing back at the tent, he noticed the satchel and her boots tossed up against it. She was out there barefoot!

He checked his weapon and walked back to where he had heard the voices. Luckily, the trail was clear. He moved cautiously, every nerve stretched to the point of snapping.

A new sound alerted him to Fontana's whereabouts. She was running, the soft thudding sound of her running, fast and agile. Was it Fontana? *It damn better be her.*

He waited for her to get closer. He set himself to snatch her off the trail, tensing his aching muscles to the limit. He wondered if his blood vessels were popping with stress. There she was, her face set in sharp

lines of exertion, the wide-eyed look of determination as she pumped her arms and legs for speed.

Like a spider, he reached out to snag her as she tried to plow on by his hiding place. She fought like a tiger when he clamped his hand over her mouth and held her tight. He wanted to yell when she elbowed him in his cracked ribs.

“Fontana! Stop it.” Keeping his voice down to a gravely whisper was tough while she tried to inflict damage on him. He shook her roughly. “It’s me. Be quiet!”

He loosened his grip, but she still eyed him with fear.

“I saw them.” She leaned over to drag air into her lungs. “Six guys. All carrying assault rifles and machetes.”

Jake took her hand. “Come on. We have to get out of here.”

“I was wrong on the distance. Wrong about everything.” It sounded like she was crying. “I’m sorry, Jake. Sorry.”

He pulled her along with him and tried to be nice when his gut told him to hurry. *’Cause they’re going to kill you if you don’t.*

“Fontana. It wasn’t anything you did. We’ll talk about it later.” He pulled her harder. “Okay?”

“Okay.” Her voice was a wheeze, and he felt like horse dung for roughing her around. But, it couldn’t be helped.

She gripped his fingers, running beside him with a noticeable limp. There was no slowing down until they reached their poverty-stricken campsite.

“Fontana.” He grabbed up her boots. “Put these on, and I’ll get the rest of our stuff.”

She pulled on the boots, sans socks, and knotted the laces. Her hair was wet. She’d been swimming!

He grimaced and grabbed the chute, rolling it into a manageable bundle. Picking up the satchel, he took one last hurried look around the area.

Nudging her arm, he spoke softly. “You’d better take a drink before we move out.”

“I can wait.” She secured her weapon in the waist clip on her pants. “I’m ready.”

He headed out in the general direction they had been going, but moved away from the path. Maybe that would give them a little hedge against being discovered right away.

His hair bristled on his head. Behind them, the armed men didn’t bother covering their presence. They were heavily armed, firing their weapons, probably trying to frighten them into joining in the gunplay.

Armed only with Glocks, the fight would be short and painful for him and his partner. Fighting back would have to wait.

They alternately ran and walked through tangled vines and reeds that towered over their heads, slogging through the mud as they crossed the rippling stream. Jake covered their tracks with dry leaves and broken limbs, constantly steering Jessica away from the trail.

He looked up through the treetops, trying to judge how long they had been moving. If he ever got another paycheck, the first thing he would buy was a damned watch.

Fontana stumbled, hitting the dirt before he could catch her. No complaining from her. She got to her feet and fell into step with him. He put his hand on her shoulder, stopping her.

“Have that drink now. You need water.”

She didn’t refuse, but only sipped from the bottle before offering it to him. He did the same, wetting his throat, but not slaking his raging thirst.

He pretended to take a big swig, and gave it back to her, relieved to see her throat moving as she swallowed a good mouthful.

She squatted to re-knot her laces, looking up at him with a self-deprecating smile. “I’m tired of tripping on these.”

“You know I’ll have to cut those off of you.”

“So?”

“So, I can’t make them longer if you want to knot them again.”

“I don’t plan to be in this hole that long.”

“Well, now that you put it that way.”



She moved ahead, leaning down to walk under the branches, stopping to fasten a leafy limb onto her shirttail.

Moving quietly, he caught up with her and laughed softly. "Don't tell me. Campfire Girls?"

He was glad she didn't want to trade verbal punches, and he was ashamed of taunting her, if only that much. They would stop to rest at sunset. Damn, it couldn't be soon enough.

Jake could tell by the shadows and sun's position they had traveled a good distance away from the plane. He held his breath. It hadn't been fast or far enough.

"Son of a bitch," he gritted out between clenched teeth.

"I hear them." Fontana's hand was on her weapon. She pointed to her left ear, and then held up four fingers.

He got it. Four damned thugs bent on murder.

Not a word passed between them as he led her back into the water and moved silently down stream. The footing wasn't too bad, not much moss covered the stones. Plus, it was cool and only ankle deep.

They heard it at the same time, the screeching of primates disturbed from their sleeping trees. Jake tugged her after him and climbed out of the stream.

He made the walking motion with his fingers over his forearm, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. She got it. Backtrack.

They moved like a couple of animals being stalked. Jake's blood simmered just below boiling because of the situation. There was no way he could take them out under the circumstances.

Hunkering down low in the reedy grass and ever watchful of her, they moved away from the hunters. She didn't slow up or ask for favors.

He wondered if she was afraid. Hell no. Her face was smooth as glass and not a sign of worry in her clear gaze.

Jake pulled up for a second, attempting to get a better fix on the men. They'd stopped firing and weren't talking. That meant trouble.

He whispered in her ear. "They're waiting for us to move."

Nodding, Fontana flattened onto her belly. “We can crawl by them.”

“How far away do you think?”

She held her hand up, flexing her fingers five times.

Damn. That close?

He touched her shoulder, making certain she heard him. “The satchel stays, and the chute. Okay?”

Her nod was barely visible in the deepening twilight. He opened the water bottle and tipped it to her lips. She drank deeply and then pushed it back to him. This time, he drank, his body screaming thanks for the moisture.

When the bottle was empty, he weighted the satchel down with several rocks and drowned it in the stream. Fishing the compass from his pocket, he strained to see the needle. He wouldn’t bother telling her the damned crystal was cracked into a million pieces and the needle gone.

He crawled up to lie beside her, patting her rear, and then motioned for her to move forward. A nagging thought made him stop their forward motion.

“Let’s have a look at those coordinates again. Maybe we’re a lot closer to Aziz’s playpen than we thought.”

“In my left pocket.” She rolled onto her right side and pointed to the largest of three pockets on her pants leg. “How much closer do you think?”

He leaned close to her, reading her neatly written numbers while he talked. “Just a guess, but those goons wouldn’t wander too far from their boss.” He scowled. “Hell, Azizi must have bought half of Nicaragua.”

Her whisper sounded soft and wistful for a tough chick. “I wonder if those purple berries are okay to eat.” Her gaze clung with greedy longing on a vine that twisted high above the trail.

“We won’t find out.” Pointing to the small map and numbers in her notebook, he leaned closer to her. “I sure screwed up on those

numbers. With any luck at all, we can be at Azizi's place by midday tomorrow."

She scratched at a bug bite on her stomach. "Wish I had some insect repellent."

He moved her hand and gently scratched the spot. "Take it easy on that."

She groaned under her breath, holding his hand tight to her belly. "Don't stop. It's driving me crazy."

He grinned at her. "I know you mean the bite."

*Stop looking at her, fool. This is not the time.* "I'm guessing we're near a road. Those hyenas probably parked their Land Rover and hiked in."

"Yeah." She looked sage and sexy at the same time. "They're too well dressed to be jungle fighters."

He stuck the notebook back in her pocket. "Let's go. They'll be back."

Jake took the lead, relying on mossy tree trunks as a source of direction. It would be hours before the stars would be of any help.

They had gone several miles, stopping only after hearing the sound of something like an ancient, slow moving contraption. It had to be a resident working, not a thug out killing for sport. "Did you hear that?"

She strained to see through the darkness. "Sounds like a wagon."

"Azizi wouldn't be riding in a wagon."

"Farmers?" She sounded hopeful.

"If we're lucky."

Jake grabbed her hand, and ran toward the sound, crossing the small stream again and charging through dense weeds. They kept running until they stood on the side of a narrow roadway.

Jake stepped in front of her, keeping his hand on his weapon, waiting to see who came around that corner. Farmer or killer?

The rumble of wheels and wooden slats reverberated through the forest, breaking the sleepy silence.

Jake's stomach relaxed, and he breathed easier when the conveyance came into full view.

A large wagon loaded with hay and a couple of cream-colored cows tied to the back of the wagon driven by a man and woman. Jake hoped they were a married couple and not some of Azizi's watchdogs.

"Come on, Fontana." Jake took the lead, walking out to meet the wagon with a smile and a wave. "Good evening."

The stoic man slowly answered. "*Hola.*"

Jake was cautious, unobtrusively touching his sidearm as he approached the couple. "We ran our Jeep into a ravine a few miles back. We kind of got lost from our party." He hugged Fontana. "My wife and I are part of a geologist survey here to preserve the water source in the forest."

The farmer interpreted for his wife, gesturing in Jake's direction. A moment later, he turned back to the weary travelers. "We can take you as far as our home. Our farm is a far distance off the road. You're welcome to ride."

Jake's smile was genuine. "We'd appreciate any help. My wife's injured her leg and is covered with bug bites."

After a brief conference, the farmer gestured to the back of the wagon. "Carmelita and I invite you to our home. She has medicine for the injury and the bites. She wants to help."

At last, they were making some headway. This ride, no matter how brief, was a gift from above.

After helping Fontana into the back of the wagon, Jake climbed in beside her.

She didn't seem at all put out by the fact a couple of mutton butts were precariously near her.

He moved as far away from the sheep as space allowed, holding her close. She scratched at one of her many bites and yawned over a question.

"Do you think they'll feed us?"

"Won't hurt to ask."

They didn't talk anymore as the wagon rumbled down the road. Jake was too worried about the mess they were in to make light conversation. He had no idea how far they must go to find their target. The possibility they were headed into a trap meant he wouldn't close his eyes that night.

## Chapter Twelve

Jessica dozed off and on even though the rickety wagon constantly reminded her of every scrape and bruise. Closing her eyes didn't diminish the strong, unpleasant smell of sheep. After what seemed like hours of torture, bouncing over ruts and rocks, the wagon came to a noisy halt. Someone gripped her arm and tried to pull her upright. Flinging straw aside and gripping her weapon, she stared at the man trying to take her from that odorous place.

"Claypool!" She heaved a sigh of relief, only to be hit with the aching condition of her hip. "I can get down with no help."

"Sure you can." He pulled her into his arms and carried her to a small shed near what must have been the main house. "Did you talk this over with the owners?"

"While you snored." He put her down on a pile of straw. "And you snore damn cute."

She didn't care what he said. She just wanted something to stop the misery of insect bites and her empty belly.

Jake surveyed the area from the doorway. "I'm going to the house for the things Maria offered. She made the bug stuff sound damned good. Not supposed to stink or sting. You stay put."

"Yes, sir." He didn't have to tell her twice. Jessica tossed the straw around until it assumed the look of a bed. She slowly sank down into it and heaved a deep sigh.

What a life. Groveling to strangers for food and shelter. At that moment, she missed the comfort of stuffed shirt Clare's way of life. The bastard. Right now, he was probably enjoying a snifter of Napoleon brandy, maybe going out for the evening with his new lady

friend. Poor woman. Hell no. He was snoring under a down comforter and snuggling on silk sheets.

The face of her watch wasn't visible under its coating of grime. She got up and went to the open doorway to rub mud from the crystal. Nine o'clock. Yes, she'd forgotten people here had their evening meal later in the day.

Jessica drew back from the door. Someone in a hurry approached the hut. Damn. She hoped that person was her partner.

The weapon in her hand was cool compared to the heat of the night.

"Don't shoot me, Fontana."

"It was close." Her ribs hurt from the steady pounding of her heart. "What did you bring?"

Jake handed her a jug of water and set several covered bowls on the dusty milking stool. "I think it's rice and some peppers thrown in. I didn't get a menu."

"Thank you anyway, horse's ass." She tipped the jug to her lips and drank. Never had water tasted so sweet and heavenly.

She watched him for a few seconds. He appeared to be in a grim mood. Nothing new, but the lawman scowl seemed darker tonight.

Wasting no time, he tossed a dark gray blanket of rough wool onto the straw. "The head's a few yards down the hill."

Jessica carefully sat the water down, and shook her head. "I'm not going down there in the dark."

"I'll go with you." He chuckled. "Hold your hand or kill the bats."

"I'm not kidding."

"Neither was I."

She felt foolish, not like an agent with years of trouble under her belt. "I just don't want more bugs on my naked ass."

He pressed a finger to her lips. "Shhh. It's not bugs I'm worried about." He lit the small lantern he'd found hanging from on a hook by the entrance. "Something's just not gelling here."

Her hunger disappeared. "What's wrong?"

“I don’t know exactly. Maybe the fact they have a wireless in the house. That’s about all they have. I found the set while they were both out of the room.” He looked over his shoulder. “We haul ass out of here as soon as the house is dark.”

Jessica gazed at the bowls with hunger clawing her belly. “That shouldn’t be long. I’ll bet they don’t have cable.”

“No. But they’re young.”

“Meaning?”

“They probably screw half the night and then go to sleep.”

“They’re farmers. They’re asleep as soon as their heads hit the pillow.”

“Sure.” Jake chuckled. “I have to go back to the house. Carmelita promised the stuff would be ready in a few minutes. Uh, holster that damned .45.”

He left, going back to the modest home to get her medicine. Such a nice boy, making a special trip for her. She snorted over her description of him.

The absolute loneliness of the place surrounded her. Too quiet, too remote, and damn frightening. She wasn’t a roughing it type girl.

Hearing Jake’s footsteps outside the hut, she leaned against the wall and waited for him, breathing easier knowing he was coming back. He came inside and dropped the dusty burlap curtain over the doorway.

She eyed the bottle he held. “I hope there’s a miracle cure in that stuff.”

He shook the bottle several times, looking unsure. “Take your clothes off.”

“What?”

“Carmelita advised me to put this over your entire body.” He grinned. “Won’t work otherwise.”

“You made that up.”

“Fine. You want to keep digging at those, or what?”

“Okay.”



He was right, and she didn't intend making any virginal objections.

She quickly removed both her shirts, caring little that she was wearing nothing more than a demi-bra. Dropping her trousers, she sighed with the idea of sweet relief.

He sat beside her on the rough bed, his gaze hungry. "Where do you want it?"

"Claypool."

"Okay." He breathed deep and made a low, mournful sound of misery in his throat.

"What was that?"

"Don't worry. Just me." He dabbed the cool liquid from the bottle over her back and neck.

Jessica groaned with pleasure. Whatever was in the potion should be patented. "More, Claypool. More."

He stroked the cool medication down her spine and above her hips. "You have places on your ass. Am I allowed to work down there?"

"We'll play doctor." She lay on her stomach, wriggling under his touch, turning onto her back at his suggestion. "Don't ease off now, Claypool. It's feeling wonderful."

The volume of her own moan surprised Jessica, and she tightened her butt cheeks to ward off another round of pleasure purring.

His big hand caressed her burning flesh and built a smelting pot heat between her legs. The sting of insect attack cooled and her body now warmed from her crotch to her throbbing breasts. An aching, longing anticipation pulsed through her.

What now? She wasn't sure Jake wanted to play around while insurmountable odds were against them. He'd become the consummate agent, probably convinced himself he should not take a roll in the hay with her. She wanted to change his mind.

"Jake." She got to her knees to face him, gazing at him with open desire. "Want me to do you?"

With tantalizing, unhurried ease, he unhooked her bra, gently cupping her breasts in his big hands. Jessica shivered, tremors of pleasure streaking through her body.

“I’m not through doing you, Fontana.” He pressed his lips to her throat, nipping lightly on his way to her mouth.

This was feeling a lot like the first time, exciting, sweet, and a little frightening. She was afraid he wouldn’t find her body to his liking, or her scent or something would turn him off.

No time to worry, not when he pulled her close and his heart thudded against her breasts. The way he kissed, deep and hard, taking her mouth in a searing kiss until she felt faint, swept her to the fiery heat of climax until she opened her mouth to beg him for sex.

Warm and full, no other lips had taken hers so completely or brought her to the center of her own sexuality. She was hot, so sensually aroused the earth spun under her.

The air had become stifling, and her skin beaded with sweat. She didn’t care. The man obviously loved sliding his belly against hers, lifting her up to suck her nipples until she moaned through clenched teeth.

And to think she’d dubbed him a simple diversion in the beginning. Heavens, had she been off the mark. This Texan was experienced and delivering what his smile promised. Pleasure!

She wasn’t imagining this, the way he drove her wild with desire, easing her back down to tease her wet folds until she squirmed hard, lifting up on her knees, squeezing her herself around the fingers he slipped deep inside her.

The lawman must be pleased with her. He was like fevered iron in her fingers, heavy in her palm.

The sensation of falling through space didn’t bother her or cool the flame of passion in her blood. Jake held her tight, dropping down on the blanket to take her senses away with more blood-drugging, deep kisses.

Why had she been worried? He was perfect. His voice stroked her breasts and between her legs, bringing up the fire of desire while he told her the lantern had to be extinguished. Too dangerous to have it lit.

Oh, hell! How could she have forgotten why she was in that hot hellhole?

With his tongue playing with hers, she squeezed her eyes shut, grasping every little burst of pleasure and trying to convince her self the moment would last forever.

*Please don't do this to me. Don't make me remember duty!*

Jessica knew the silent little plea was out of line, that she shouldn't be having an erotic moment, not while that murdering devil she hunted was still free to kill.

Forget about him, her nasty inner voice coaxed. "I will," she moaned aloud just as Jake bit her neck and took her with the strength she had longed for. Deep, deliberate, and powerful thrusts pushed her to the heavenly sordid climax that sizzled through her blood and muscles.

He came, rocking into her with a loud groan and kissed her into a swoon of helpless delight she'd never experienced. So, quick, hot sex was really worth waiting up for. She sighed and held his face close to hers, sucking his plump lower lip into her mouth.

"I think I loved that, Claypool." The sex had been exactly how she'd wanted it. Anticipation had kicked out the need for long foreplay, and the sex had been incredible, hard, fast and deep. Maybe next time the party would have twelve courses.

"I know you did." He laughed, letting his weight rest on her. "Not as much as I did." He kissed her softly, running his tongue between her pulsing lips. "Want it again?"

"If only. I'll take a rain check." Enjoy it while it's here. Jessica took advantage of the moment to squeeze the bunched mounds of his ass, testing the hard muscles of his shoulders and arms. "My god, you're tight as a bow."

“I might say the same for you, lady. Damn, you smell incredible.” Jake sniffed her hair. “Just like apple blossom.”

She’d forgotten the bug medication, and the fact she had been ravenous earlier. Pure contentment allowed her to relax and stretch beneath him. “If we had more time, I’d take a bath in the cattle tank I saw outside the door.”

He rolled off her, patting her ass several times. “We’d better get ready to pull out of here, pronto.” He yanked on his pants and then his shirt. Setting a pail of water near the makeshift bed, he grinned at her. “Not much of a toilet for my lady, but we’re kind of in a bind here.”

“It’s fine, Claypool.” She wasn’t shy with him. No time and no inclination. He was her partner and now her lover. They would never have secrets from each other like ordinary people. She wondered if he wanted to talk.

With only time for a quick pan bath, Jessica washed quickly and put on her clothes, then tried to brush straw from her hair. The cloth of the rag Jake had given her provided material to tie back her hair.

The weight of her weapon on her waist gave her a feeling of completion once again. What more could a gal want than blistering hot sex and a vicious weapon? She grimaced with self-deprecation. Indeed, what?

The shoelace thing came back to haunt her. They were knotted in a dozen places.

“Fontana.” Jake had reverted back into his bad-assed self. “Shake a leg. The house is dark.”

He stood with undisguised impatience, anxiously looking outside, waiting for her to tie her boots. She had a problem. “Give me your blade.”

“What? We don’t have time to screw again.”

“Oh pu-leeze! Your knife, jackass.”

He squatted down in front of her, reworking the tattered laces in her boots. “I told you about this.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I guess that means you’re pissed off at me.”

“Why, of course not.” She got her boots on and pushed him aside. “If those farmers are finished having sex, we can be on our way.”

He picked up the blanket and folded it. “Here.” He handed her a bowl of the food Carmelita had given him. “Go ahead. It’s clean.”

He devoured his in a few bites, setting the bowl on a small shelf. Jessica hesitated, but figured if he’d gulped it down, she’d risk it.

Damn, it was delicious. She greedily licked the bowl before he took it from her hand. “Let’s make a recon mission around the place.”

She wiped her mouth. “Check.”

He lifted the dusty curtain and went outside. Before she left, Jessica checked around the small room. They couldn’t afford to leave anything behind.

The moon had risen and the area was lit up like a sound stage. Jake looked like a sleuth in one of those wild and fictitious cop shows. His hair stood on end, and his chin was covered with a two-day prickly beard. Made no difference. He looked awesome, and her body tightened in appreciation.

Pulling herself together, Jessica thought about the spot they were in. Not for long however. While a skim of thin clouds defused the moon glow, Jake stopped at the water pump near the hut. He worked the pump handle, leaning over to let the cool water splash over his head. He combed his hair with his fingers and ran a hand over his chin.

“Your hair still sticks straight up.” She managed to stifle her laugh.

“You love it.” Touching his knuckles to her jaw, Mister Fun Time vanished and Mister Agent stepped in. “Stop horsing around and check your weapon. We’re outta here.”

Before her flip reply slipped over her lips, he grabbed her arm, pulling her along to take cover behind a large shrub that smelled of spice.

Brilliant light from a huge black RV's headlights sliced through the dark. She followed suit when Claypool dropped to the ground. "I don't think those old boys are farmers."

"Killers, right down to the fat guy pissing on the back tire."

Jessica pulled her Glock from its clip, and checked the ammo again. Old habits never die. Careless agents always do. Her hard-assed Field instructor had branded that cryptic little ditty into her brain.

She had no intention of biting the bullet. Far too many things to finish back home in Seattle. And, there was Jake. He needed her, at least at the moment. Okay, so it wasn't personal, just business.

She grumbled behind the man that probably would never be far from her thoughts. "I'll be damned if I die here, ravaged by bugs and stinking to high heaven."

He patted her ass, obviously trying to convey agreement, or maybe it was pity. "Fontana." He crouched against a rusting barrel. "Let's make sure the main pimp isn't in the house."

"Okay. And if he isn't?"

"We take the RV."

She didn't relish walking another mile. "I say we take the damn thing no matter what."

"Damn, Fontana." He turned to grin at her. "You're a regular little hood. "Where'd you learn that bad-ass stuff?"

"Same place you did."

"It's making me hot."

"Get the RV, and I'll cool your jets."

## Chapter Thirteen

Jake felt Fontana's hand on his waist, her light touch reminding him there was another world away from hunting slack-jawed killers and perverts. He reached back and squeezed her hand.

"Let's have a look-see in the back window."

They moved cautiously, reaching the windows without a hitch. He could see inside the house, five men in dark suits. They were messing with the radio he'd seen earlier. That answered his questions. It was more than likely one Azizi's many communication sources.

The farmer and his wife huddled in a corner. They looked scared out of their wits.

The knot of concern he'd fought all night nearly just became the size of a basketball. He pressed his mouth to her ear. "How many men arrived in that RV?"

She glanced around. "Six. Don't tell me!"

"Yeah. One of our chicks has flown the nest."

Not really. The sixth man was coming toward their hiding place, unbuckling the belt that held up his drawers.

She sounded pissed. "What the hell's he going to do?"

"Looks like he's going to take a dump."

"Here!"

"Keep your voice down."

Fontana gripped his arm. "If he squats here. I'm braining him."

"Exactly." Jake hoped braining the guy would be as simple as she made it sound.

He pulled her closer and pressed flat to the rough boards of the house, hoping the shadows concealed them.

Their luck held. The thug farted before dropping his pants.

Jake cupped his hand over Fontana's mouth while she cussed up a storm.

"Easy, gorgeous."

He slowly took his hand away from her mouth and groaned low.

"What the hell did that guy eat?"

She gagged and tried to get away. "I'm beaming him now!"

"Not unless he sees us."

She gripped her weapon and pulled her T-shirt neck up to cover her nose. The thin material didn't muffle her groan before she gagged again. This time, the guy enjoying his after dinner squat heard her, too. His head swiveled from left to right, and finally he looked behind him. He made the mistake of trying to stand up.

"I'm not waiting to see if he's a good shot." Fontana pulled away from Jake, glancing toward the door. "We have to put him to sleep before he sets off a real warning to the others."

Before he could grab her arm, Fontana was moving like a stalking tiger toward the distracted goon. Jake clenched his teeth, hoping she got in a clean shot.

She didn't. Being reviled made her anxious, and her Glock bounced off the side of his skull. Yeah, she'd hit him, but he only growled and tried to lunge at her. He fell back in his own dung, and began to scream for the others.

"Aw, man!" Jake kicked the yowling thug under the chin, not waiting to see if his alarm had been heard.

"Fontana. Remind me to tie you up next time I have to hit the latrine."

Her profile was clean in the glare of moonlight, chiseled with determination to live. "You don't have anything to worry about as long as you squat downwind."

He couldn't help the laugh that followed them to the shiny black RV. "Stay low. I'll look in the truck."



Jake hurried, urgency choking him as accented voices drifted from where they had left the guy with the bellyache.

Holy Moses, there they were. The keys dangled from the ignition, just waiting for him to steal. Fontana covered the rear, her glance at him saying she thought he moved too slow.

“Hurry up!”

“Okay, get your butt up here and jump in!”

She took one step before the pristine silence was torn to hell with the shriek of a car alarm.

“Jake! The alarm!”

“Forget the alarm. Get in.”

She scrambled over him and watched with a look of raw excitement on her face as he twisted the key in the ignition. It wouldn't start.

“We have to leave it, Fontana. It's set to fail.”

She opened the passenger side door and rolled out while he followed suite on the driver's side. They met in front of the van and sprinted for cover of the roadside brush.

“Claypool. No more stopovers.”

“Gotcha.”

Jake exhaled heavily, realizing they had no plan now. He didn't like the idea of her crawling like a damned slug through brush.

No help for that right now. Five men with nothing to do but kill them were beating the brush and getting closer.

She scratched her leg and lifted up on one shoulder to look through the grass. “They've moved off to the other side. I don't want to wait and see if they're smart enough to flush us out like rabbits.”

“You have a point there.” Jake helped her up. “Let's find that road and follow it. Since the mob's out here, we're probably on the right track.”

While she tucked her T-shirt in her pants, he watched with appreciation. Fontana was a lot of woman and sexy as hell no matter how scruffy she looked right now. He'd tell her that. Someday.

\* \* \* \*

Jessica caught his male study of her. Jake was a heartbreaker, and she'd let him in the door. Sex with her partner was a stupid move, but now she had to admit it had been incredible. He was twenty-nine. She was older than him. She didn't mind at all.

She nodded and followed him away from the house. A light breeze carried the last remnants of his cologne back to her. Why had she ever considered it a problem? The sex had been exactly what she wanted, maybe even more. The little age difference was kind of flattering to her ego. She'd never complain about it again.

At the moment, more important issues were at hand. Now, if she could stay on her feet. Running track at the YWCA was one thing. Jumping deep ruts and tangled roots meant getting out of a bad situation alive.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Jake couldn't believe how messed up his sense of direction had become. Something about being under a canopy of leaves and maneuvering at night screwed with his brain.

Fontana was limping more noticeably and guilt forced him to slow down. "Take five."

She sank down on the log he'd found and rubbed her lower back. "I'm going to have to go to the powder room before I move another step."

"Be quiet about it," he reminded her. "We'd better pick up the pace and get out of this area."

"Right."

He thought about telling her to do her job right there, but knew she wouldn't go for that. She wouldn't go far, not in the dark.

She surprised him by coming back in a different direction. He'd missed hearing her moving around in the bushes. Either she was part cat, or he was slipping.

"Claypool." Her voice was soft and clear. If she was nervous, she didn't show it. "I hear music."

"The sex was that good?" He laughed softly at her huffing sound of derision.

She leaned against him and touched his mouth. "I'm not being romantic, cowboy. Listen."

He did listen while nibbling her fingertips. "By damn. I think you're right." He held her hand as they walked on, the pleasant sound gaining in volume. Gypsy music?

Lanterns on posts led the way to the soirée, where they must have been cooking. A haze of smoke filtered through the trees, almost reminding him of backyard BBQs.

Fontana pointed in the direction of the happy sound. “A wedding or birthday probably.” She ran her fingers through her gnarled hair. “Do I look like a party girl?”

He was surprised that she’d become self-conscious about her rumpled appearance.

“I’d party with you anytime.” He looked up to gauge the time left until daybreak. “Let’s go see what we can steal.”

She grinned mischievously. “I like it.”

Too bad not everyone agreed with his idea. They had gone to the edge of a huge gathering of party guests, and practically ran into a pair of teenage lovers getting it on against a tree.

Jake groaned and held Jessica back. The young girl’s eyes were saucer-sized when she saw him. The gangly young man finished his business before she could get his attention. He turned around and probably pissed himself.

Jake went for the tried and true routine. “I won’t tell your parents if you give me the keys to your car.”

Jessica went into a routine of shock and indignation. “Holy Mary, Mother of God.” She covered her mouth as she browbeat them. “Shame! You must go to confession immediately. God is very angry right now. Animals!”

The boy’s voice squeaked like a rubber toy, and he dug in his pants pocket, pulling out condoms with a set of keys.

“Here. Take them.” He shrank back, just out of Jake’s reach.

“I don’t want your rubbers.” Jake scooped up the keys, then smacked the youth’s shaking hand aside. “The car. Show me the car. Now!”

Looking as if he was swallowing his Adam’s apple, the boy hurried to a fairly decent looking red muscle car parked under a tree.

He growled a warning at the boy. "If you say a word before an hour is up, I'll come back and cut off that pecker of yours."

Jessica jumped in the car and stared at the weeping girl, offering some solace. "Don't worry. You may not be pregnant. This time."

Jake slid in the seat beside her and laughed. "You're a real comfort. She'll probably be frigid from now on."

"She needs the crap scared out of her. Screwing in the jungle like an animal."

"We'll talk about that later." He put the car in gear and drove out of the party area, heading for the narrow road. With any luck, they'd get to Azizi's place before he took a powder.

He held out no hope for the Ambassador.

\* \* \* \*

Gripping the armrest to stay in the seat, Jessica shouted at her driver. "Claypool! You're supposed to try and keep us alive. Remember?"

He glanced her way as if she were a pesky child and then ignored her, pressing the gas pedal down to the floorboard.

The road was nothing more than an alleyway in tall weeds, rutted deep enough to hide a water buffalo and leave room for his brother. Of course, it would have been frightening if one could see something other than a green blur

He only slowed at river fords and still the car created a six-foot spray on either side. The engine was grinding and threatening to die on the spot, but Claypool kept his foot on the gas.

Careening around a sharp curve, they met their possible doom. Logs had been thrown across the roadway, and Jessica knew they hadn't gotten there on their own.

She screamed in surprise when Jake gunned the tired automobile into action, driving around the barrier and back onto the road. He pointed ahead.

“I figure we’ll have company anytime. I’m dropping you off up here, and you hightail it to the nearest phone.”

She stared at him in amazement. “Are you nuts? I was sent here, kill or be killed. Don’t talk down to me anymore!”

Her remarks had not made a dent in his determination. “Yeah, yeah. I said get out. I need you to do your part, Fontana. This is it. An order.”

He stopped the car, and leaned over to open her door.

Jessica couldn’t even swallow her outrage. She was too thirsty. “Damn you, Claypool.” She rolled out of her seat and stumbled to the sandy soil. “Go ahead by yourself. Stubborn horses rear.”

He kissed his fingertips and waved as he roared off in that crappy car.

Jessica took off after the car and quickly got a reminder that her hip was injured. Pains, sharp and lingering, shot down all her aspirations of being a heroine.

Hunkering down in the roadside weeds, she mentally drew up her plan of action. Stay on the road as much as possible, follow his tracks, and you have to be on the right trail. Sure, and he’d leave breadcrumbs, showing her the way.

In the distance, she heard the car backfire, and snorted with derision. He’d blow the engine within another mile. With that in mind, she took off running, hoping someone would have aspirin.

The car had lost its muffler system as well if she read the awful sound in the distance correctly.

The next sounds chilled her blood and froze her to the spot. Gunfire!

Blazing a trail through the brush was taking its toll on her. What the hell? They wouldn’t be looking for her yet. She had to take the chance. Out on the uncluttered road, she sprinted off toward the sounds that meant her partner was in deep trouble.

They were a lot further away than she’d calculated, sounds hovering to the ground and intensified in the heavily foliated place.

Out of breath and now out of hope, Jessica dropped into the tall grass again. The car was sitting where he'd run it into a tree. Jake was gone.

Straining to hear any threatening sound, she got up and checked the area out. Blood on the steering wheel and seat. There were drops on the hard packed sand and on the door.

Her heart pummeled her ribs when she pieced together the events that had recently happened here. Azizi's watchdogs had been waiting to stop them, using several big SUVs to block the way.

Shots had been fired, and the blood meant someone had been injured. Or killed.

## Chapter Fifteen

The demolished car refused to start for Jessica. That meant she hiked. Something under the left front fender caught her eye. She picked up Jake's weapon, not prepared for the stab of fear to find it empty and sticky with blood.

Bursting with worry, she forced herself to stop crying inside and concentrate on taking Azizi to justice. There was a cloth shopping bag in the backseat, and she grabbed it, stuffing the Glock inside. She was duty bound to carry out the mission, with or without him.

If she had any luck at all, the ambassador would be alive along with Jake.

Throwing the shopping bag's strap over her head, she headed off down the road, moving as smoothly as possible in spite of the increasing pain in her hip.

Thirst drove her to do the forbidden after hearing the trickle of water just off the road. She quickly located a tiny waterfall that spilled from a crevice in the rocks.

The water looked pure, but probably had a dozen different bacteria to kill her. What the hell? She'd risk it and hit the nearest infirmary when she got the chance.

Jessica drank her fill, hoping in the back of her mind that Jake wasn't suffering if he was still alive. Something dark and sinister hovered around in these woods, and she shivered with dread.

Getting back on the trail was simply mind over matter now. If she stopped again, it would be over for both of them. Groaning in increasing despair, she forced herself ahead.



The tire tracks appeared intermittently, depending on the road condition. They were from several big vehicles, the kind Azizi's boys drove.

Realizing she'd heard nothing for almost an hour, Jessica admitted to herself she'd lost them. She slumped to the ground in defeat and misery, vowing to stand and fight when the goons found her. And they would.

She retied her dirty hair into a ponytail and wiped at the dust in her eyes, looking off in the distance at a stone wall. A wall? Out here? Getting to her feet, Jessica smiled with elation.

The bricks were new and laid by craftsmen, not done by the locals. Who would pay for that extravagance in the outback? A man with a huge ego and tons of cash. Azizi!

After taking several deep breaths, she stood, priming her weapon before shoving it back in its holster.

Blessed with a quiet step, she moved to the entry gate to peer around the gate of the brick wall. Nothing to worry about, except the parrots in the woods having a dispute. She took an anxious look behind her, hoping the fuss wasn't because some of Azizi's men moved around out there.

No guard. They weren't stupid. They expected her. Probably just not the way she planned to show up.

Several SUVs and trucks were parked under a fancy striped canvas tent. She looked them over, choosing a big, black workhorse Ram truck. They needed a dependable getaway car that wouldn't fizzle out on rough roads and water. Plus, it was big enough for her, Jake, and the ambassador. Pulling the keys from her borrowed ride, she dropped them in her pants pocket.

She ran on the graveled road for a few yards and then veered off to take cover under the dense growth of ornamental trees. They were still holding on to their fading white flowers.

Yes, it was still there, but Jessica had given up the pain in her leg to the higher power. This mission now held major importance to her personally.

*You're not important. Take the pain.*

That took every ounce of her will power. Skirting off the smooth roadway, she moved cautiously, camouflaging herself as well as possible. Thankfully, her clothing, or what was left of it, blended into the greens and other somber winter hues of the area.

Peering down on the back yard of the estate style home, she pinpointed several large brindle mastiffs having their dinner in a closed in dog run. All the same, it chilled her enthusiasm. Her nerves uncoiled a bit when she thought they might not be so eager to chew on her with their bellies full.

She pulled back in the shadows, closing her eyes for a few seconds.

*Think, Jessica. Hurry. Hurry!*

Grabbing a huge breath of air, she duck-walked down to the stream, holding her weapon up in her right hand. She was sure her breathing would alert anything within a mile of her.

*Quiet! You have to be quiet. Jake's depending on you.*

Tricking men was nothing. Dogs weren't so easy. Pulling herself along the streambed was excruciatingly slow and painful. Rough stones and sharp sticks underwater felt like shrapnel in her elbows.

Taking a chance, she crawled back to the top of the stream bank, keeping low. Her smile was fixed in cold discovery.

So that's where their ambush was set up. Squatting like chickens on nests, near the front entrance of the house, several men with handguns and assault weapons tried to appear alert.

The building in the rear caught her eye. Beautiful Spanish colonial architecture and windows covered with some kind of black material. The extra attempt at security made it all the more interesting.

Her breath caught in her chest, fear crystallizing in her veins. One of the guards must have gotten bored and was heading for her hiding place. He turned back when another guard yelled at him.

The second he left, she stood, picking her way to the rear of the building, hitting the ground whenever things didn't sound right to her.

The final few feet, she belly crawled to a utility cart and rolled under it. For the next ten minutes, she sorted out the number of men and where they were posted. Ten killers and everyone battle ready, carrying firepower enough to knock a plane out of the sky.

She shrugged, finding wry humor in the fact she wouldn't suffer if they hit her.

Rolling from her cover, Jessica stood and pressed her face to the dark shield on the rear window. One bare bulb had been left on. Damn. She couldn't make out anything but canvas-covered mounds around the room.

*Stop wasting precious time. Break in there and check it out.*

She took off her long-sleeved shirt and wrapped it around her arm, then hit the window hard as she could. Whatever the dark stuff was didn't hold up well.

Glass flew into the storage shed, hitting the floor with minimum noise. She said a silent prayer of thanks for all the tarps that muffled the sound.

Pulling a five-gallon paint can to the window, she tied the shirt around her waist before climbing up on it to slide into the quiet room, hitting the floor with a thud.

Expecting to see one of the guards any second, she crouched against the wall. Eyes adjusted, she saw no threat and stood to look around.

Seeing no sign of torture jump-started her heart, casing it to thud with expectation and fear once again. Where would they keep Jake? Probably the same place they stashed their other detainees.

She wanted to storm the house and rescue him, but common sense held her back. One beat-up woman against a dozen killers that ate bigger breakfasts than her would hardly be the way to go.

Lifting the tarps, she pumped her fist, shouting under her breath. True to terrorist ways, Azizi stockpiled enough weapons to hold a battalion at bay.

Her choice for the day looked like a cute little puzzle box. Army green, with four big round holes in it. The average person wouldn't even bother picking up the grenade launcher, but Jessica hugged it in her arms.

Grenades and ammo for their Glocks plus an assault rifle completed her outfit.

The gear wasn't light, but that didn't matter. She carried it to the double doors and pushed against them. Another break. Not secured. These guys had no respect for her intelligence.

*School is about to start.*

\* \* \* \*

They had beaten the crap out of him, loosening his jaw teeth and breaking his nose. Still, Jake was alert and making notes about the fancy room he'd been dumped in. Tied to a chair, he could see what took place on the veranda through some double doors.

Damn boring except the cute maid with a great ass eyeing him every time she walked by. Plus, various thugs walked around and stopped in occasionally to hit him someplace new or threaten his life.

She was never far from his thoughts. Fontana. He believed he'd done the right thing, dumping her from the car. He felt sick, imagining the treatment she'd get in the hands of these savages. Women meant very little to them.

The shield she wore guaranteed torture and assault, and he felt responsible. If they lived through this little adventure, he'd most

certainly lose his job and never work in anything related to trust and reliability again.

Leaving her behind! She'd be helpless out there. He pulled against the thick ropes binding his legs and hands to a straight backed chair. His wrists were raw from trying to work free of the ropes. Aw damn, now the cut above his eye was bleeding again, and his vision was dim at best. There were vague images in his mind of being held down while a huge hairy ape stuck a hypodermic needle in his arm.

Turning his head to wipe the stream of blood on his collar, a skittering figure flitting past a doorway in the next room. Probably a vision since he was so near passing out.

But, damn. It had Fontana's face. His chin dropped to his chest.

*Don't go to sleep, man. Get out of this mess and find her.*

"Psssst!"

What the hell? He roused and scanned the room slowly, trying to see clearly with one swollen eye. There was something going on. Sure, he was probably dead, just having a rigor mortis dream. He laughed, the deduction too stupid to translate.

"Psssst!" A tapping sound came from the doorway. "Over here."

He finally focused on the privacy screen against a wall where the sounds came from. Nothing. He was losing it fast.

Then he saw it, an eyeball staring at him through a hole in the fancy wood. It blinked. Trying to not get angry, he pretended ignorance.

"I didn't see that."

"Yes you did." Movement behind the screen alerted him to trouble. His battered nerves prepared him for a fight. They were getting ready to torture him some more.

Something in white floated toward him. It smelled like April...apple blossoms. Momentary grief tore his heart out and he sobbed. "Fontana."

"I'm here, honey."

Soft hands touched his head and sweet lips pressed to his. He sat forward, trying to stand. "Where are you?"

"Here." She placed him back in the chair. "I brought goodies."

He cocked his head. What the hell was she talking about? "I'm dead, right?"

"Not as long as I'm in charge." She kissed his hand before going to work on the ropes. "Be still for a minute. Your wrists have swollen."

"Fontana?" Doubting his sensibilities, he had to reassure himself this wasn't a dream. "I'm happy as hell to see you. Uh, what's that?"

She touched his cheek. "My purse."

"Damn ugly purse."

She laughed softly, just before he felt a rush of blood shoot through his arms. The ropes were gone. He wanted to stand up, but she pushed him back down. "Stay put. We have company."

The guard that loved to hit most stood in the doorway and stared menacingly at him. Jake pretended to be blacked out, holding his arms behind him.

"What you doin'? No sleeping for you, idiot."

The lard-ass lumbered toward him and threatened him with the butt of his rifle. Strange, but the guy lowered his weapon, and then fell to the floor. Hey, he was the one bleeding now, all from a nice neat hole in his forehead.

Was that Fontana? He tried to warn her not to do it, but his vision in dirty clothes floated from hiding to kick the guard, checking to make sure he'd bought the farm.

"Come on, Claypool. Time to set our perimeters."

"Whatever you say, Major."

"Close, but I only made Lieutenant."

"Fontana. How'd you find me?" He stood, and then leaned against her, trying to steady himself. "Look, I'm sorry about leaving you. I really like you...a lot."

She was quiet, holding him up and leading him down a hallway to a door. "Say, Lieutenant." Oh Christ! More pain than he could remember streaked through his head. "You have a plan?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I do." He wanted to chuckle at her soft grunt when they started down some steps. "Claypool, stand here. I have to get the all clear."

"Happy to, ma'am." His head swam, and blood dripped into his ear and into his mouth. "Fontana."

He couldn't see her, and his hand went to his holster, shaking him to his boot soles. It was gone! He calmed down in the sweet wrap of her perfume.

"We have about sixty seconds to get to the stable."

"What's there?"

"Everything we need to take these goons out. Hang on to me."

"Hell no. I can walk."

"Okay. How about you picking up the pace a little?"

He grimaced, but took off as if he felt aces. "Just how much further is that place?"

She caught his hand and pulled him along behind her. "Only a few more feet. Come on."

He wiped his face and eyes with his sleeve. Blurry, but doable. The way she pushed back could only mean trouble. "Jess, where's my iron?"

"Empty. I'll give it to you when we're in the clear."

"Fine, but I'll probably be minus a leg by then."

"Shut up and run!"

He did as told and raced in his mind after her slender form. She pulled up short, and he stumbled into her. "Sorry, honey."

She turned and yanked him toward her. "Honey wants you to go faster."

"I'm trying." Damn it. He sounded like a kid. "You say it's not far?"

“Here, Jake, right here.” He was being unceremoniously pushed into a dark place that smelled like Texas.

“How’d you get me home?” He chuckled and hugged her tight. “I knew you were a honey.”

They stood in that embrace for several seconds before she got serious again. “I think they may have given you a truckload of heroin from the glaze in your eyes. Or, what I can see of them.”

Heroin? He didn’t do drugs. “Hey, honey, I don’t think so. I hit my head on that tree. ‘Member?’”

She kissed his cheek, and her sigh sounded weary. “Yeah, I remember. Please don’t make any noise. Not yet.”

“Okay.” He was used to waiting for things to happen. “Where you going?”

“I’m just looking out the window.” He watched her cross the floor. “I know you want to sit, but I’d really rather you didn’t.”

“I’ll lean against this couch.”

Jessica lifted the canvas cover. “Yeah, a designer number.”

He grinned. “Yeah? What kind? I have a Sears couch.”

“Product of Iran and Company.”

She wasn’t having fun now. The tone of her voice had none of its playful lifts and falls. Just deep, smooth calm.

His jumbled thoughts rolled together and a single word blazed in his mind. Ambassador!

“Fontana. We have a problem.”

“I know.”

“We have to locate our mission target.”

Why was he telling her this stuff? She’d been at the meetings. He froze when she flattened to the wall, her eyes narrowed. She gestured at the square thing he had sat on.

“What?”

“Get off that. I’ll need it in a minute.”

He raised his rear off the metal object. “You set your purse down here?”



“Yeah. It weighs thirty pounds.”

His brain clicked some information through his head. Sitting on something made of PVC with M260 in faded print on the side. “Hey, Fontana. This dude’s kinda old. Has four openings in the side like a...rocket launcher.”

Her head whipped around and she stared at him. “You’re being choosy?”

“No, just curious.” He tried to pick it up.

“Put that down!” She beelined to him and grabbed the launcher. “I have to know exactly where this is. I’m going out to search for the Ambassador.”

“I’ll load up.”

“Stay.”

“Okay.”

He felt the crush of abandonment after Honey shut the door and left him alone. No, not honey. Jessie. The pretty one.

## Chapter Sixteen

Jessica hated leaving Jake alone, even if for only a couple minutes. In his drugged condition, he could easily give away their presence.

So be it. She had to pinpoint everyone's position. For a few seconds, she pressed her ear to the door. He must be asleep or spaced out completely. That was another thing. She had to figure out what they'd pumped in him.

Maybe he had only hours to live, depending on what the drug had been. No, she had to get her priorities straight. The mission stated she was to focus her every thought and effort on the rescue of the ambassador above all else. Jake was now secondary, no longer an emotional issue.

She would cross that bridge when she had to, but at the moment, she knew that plan was not going to fly. Leaving Jake was not an option, no matter what.

The word priority loomed in her brain like a neon light. Find the man you're supposed to be helping. Fear rose up bitter in her mouth, and a huge dose of self-loathing. If the ambassador was still alive, he most likely was in the house, too, but first, she'd have a look in all the outbuildings.

The nearest one was deceptively pretty, pale pink brick and a lovely small porch complete with glider. Probably a place for the hoods to sleep.

She scraped the building with her hip as she moved, trying to be invisible. She reached the porch, limping across the smooth flagstone tiles to lean against the door.

Pushing it open, she waited for the firing to begin. Nothing. Within seconds, her heart pumped again, and she went inside the small house.

No lights were on, and in the darkness she stumbled over something in the floor. The odor rising from whatever had tripped her sickened Jessica. Blood. Old blood. Damn it!

Her eyes adjusted to the dim light coming from one uncovered window. A man with silver hair lay on the floor, his body seeming to be strangely contorted. He appeared to be dead.

*Don't rush to judgment here, Jess. Make sure.*

She slid her hand into his back pocket, hoping to find his wallet. No wallet, probably taken by whoever killed him. His coat pocket might have something to confirm her suspicions.

The sight was gruesome, but Jessica had seen it all before, except this time there was a new twist. The horrendous gunshot wound to his temple was all too familiar. Gripping his shoulder, she rolled him onto his back.

His head stayed put, still facing downward even though he lay on his back. She stared at the decapitated torso while trying to restart her heart. His tormenters had shot him before removing his head. Almost to the point of jumping out of her skin, she hurriedly made mental notes, identifying the person as male, dressed well, hair trimmed neatly. She checked his hands noting they were clean and manicured, wearing a heavy gold signet ring. She slipped it from his finger.

Now what? His jacket pockets had been picked clean. Figuring she'd have to simply guess on his identity, she looked around the place. Something on the floor a few feet away caught her eye. She crawled across the room and picked up a snakeskin wallet, checking out the contents near the window.

The man had not been robbed, just brutally murdered. Almost a thousand dollars in cash and several credit cards bearing the name of Miguel Yaqueros, US Ambassador to Nicaragua. The photo left no doubt in her mind. This was their man, and he was dead. She felt sick

with self-reproach. There were no excuses for acting less than professionally.

Jake!

Her mind raced with fear and icy anticipation of the hell they might have to go through. If he'd left the small building, she'd go nuts. She wasn't going to lose him.

Being less cautious now, Jessica peeked out the door and slid through the opening she'd allowed herself. Without looking back, she stuffed the ambassador's personal effects in one of her pockets and shivered. She caught herself falling into one of her many bad habits. Not breathing until she was near passing out. Breathe, damn it!

Praying for divine help, she went in the building to find Jake still sitting on the launcher, eyes closed and head bleeding.

"Jake."

He instantly opened his eyes, wiping an arm over his face. "Man, I'm glad you're here. I'm needing a pain pill. Got any morphine?"

"You've had enough."

Oh, crap. Why did she snap at him? He probably was hurting. "Jake, let's go. I have a ride waiting for us if we can make it."

"Sure." His eyes rolled back, and Jessica wanted to cuss. He recovered when she touched his lips. "You're still here? I really like you."

"Bloody hell." She picked up the grenades, looping the belt over her head. After stuffing extra rounds of ammo for their Glocks in her pockets, she loaded a full clip in the rifle. "That's about all I can carry, Claypool. Hug my neck, Cowboy."

This was a far cry from the man she'd made love to only hours ago. Willing to comply with her every command, he was wasted, and that scared her.

He made no noise and didn't question her when she picked up the box he'd been sitting on. Just kissed her cheek and trudged along beside her.

Lugging that launcher took every ounce of strength she had left. If she didn't hurry, Azizi would be on his way to his tent on the Riviera. She didn't intend to let that happen.

"Jake." She leaned him against the wall. "I'm going shopping. You stay right here."

"Give me a weapon."

Could he possibly be coming out of whatever they gave him? Maybe. "I'll only be gone a short time." She grunted under the weight of the launcher on her shoulder. "Then we're going home."

"Okay. Strap me, honey."

There he went with that honey thing again. What the hell? He'd automatically know how to fire the damned Glock, but she wouldn't take the risk. "Here's your weapon, Jake. I'll load it when I get back."

"Thanks." He cocked the deadly weapon and held it across his chest, looking as if he'd never been out of his mind, like she knew he still was. "When those bad boys get here, I'll give them a reason to howl." He grinned. "Hey, honey. Hurry back."

Out of time, she touched his hand. "I'm gone, Claypool. Stay alert. Watch for me, okay?"

He saluted, touching his thumb to his nose. "Check."

Outside, the tension had thickened. Azizi's men had discovered Jake's absence and were beating the brush for him, running in a pack like hyenas.

Watching from her hiding place, she figured they would kill her for laughs.

No time to figure out an escape without a fight. Made no difference. There was no leaving until the mission was complete. She focused on Azizi and the coming end to the horrible saga he'd been living.

She took several steps, hoisting the launcher up on her shoulder. A sound behind her forced Jessica to quickly look back.

"Jake!"

His smile threw her for a loop. Mischievous and pure Jake. He carried the assault rifle she'd found. He rested his hand on the butt of the Glock stuffed into the waist of his torn up jeans.

"At your service."

What timing. He'd never looked more heart-rippingly sexy before. She gritted her teeth against the absurdity.

"How's your head? Are you straight?"

He winked at her, misunderstanding her meaning, obviously. "You know I am." He winced and rubbed his nose. "Okay, just point me to the pigs."

Fury and desperation shot through her. "Why didn't you stay put? You'll get us both killed. These guys aren't fooling around, damn it! Just ask the ambassador."

Shame made her ache for him when Jake hung his head. He nodded and pointed ahead. "I'll wait for your orders, honey."

She let it go with a quick pat to his shoulder. "I'm going in the house and finding that snake." He perked up, eyes on her face. "We use enough firepower to confuse the idiots and take out Azizi and as many of them as we can."

"I'll cover your back."

Okay. He'd do that. She felt a sniggle of worry about his staying close and not trying to converse with the animals trying to kill him.

"Jake, listen to me." The damned launcher was cutting into her shoulder. "The second we finish Azizi, we run for the truck parked down the road. Drop that rifle when it's empty. I don't have any more ammo for it. I have another clip for our Glocks. That's it. Okay?"

"Hell yeah." He grinned, checking the clip in the rifle. "I'm right behind you."

"Stick like glue, partner. I'm not going to lose you after what we've been through."

He moved up to thump her shoulder. "Affirmative, Lieutenant."

She glanced at him, the mix of humor and fear twisting up to cut deep in her heart. "We'll discuss rank after we clear out of here." Grimacing hard, she nodded. "Let's go."

She moved quickly, putting the weight of the cumbersome weapon out of her thoughts. Ahead lay the hot zone, flames and bullets all meant for her and Jake.

Regret over the fallen ambassador skittered down her spine, stiffening her resolve. She tensed her arms, holding the launcher steady while stepping inside the spacious kitchen.

A rack of lamb and loads of fresh vegetables were spread out on the table and counters. With any luck, this was one meal they would have to miss.

A wall-sized wine rack and stainless steel appliances for these thugs seemed ludicrous to Jessica.

Fear made her spin quickly to check on Jake. Her breath hesitated until he looked her in the eye and nodded. He was still with her and able to hold his own a little better.

She moved ahead, edging along the wall, swallowing down her fear, and trying to see everything at once.

"Fontana, I'll take point."

Okay, she had to trust him. "Go ahead. I'm right behind you, partner."

He led the way out a side door, hesitating a second before striding toward the shady patio.

Increasing her grip on the rifle, she raised it to her chest, trigger finger curled against the smooth metal.

"Fontana." He nodded to partially open French doors, and shouldered his way inside the house. He looked back at her.

Fresh blood on his collar meant the wound above his eye had reopened.

"Are you able to see?"

“Good enough. Let’s get this freak.” His comment hummed in her ear as they entered the fancy reception area. The place was ominously quiet.

Jessica took a quick look around, amazed at the lavish décor. Not something you link to the murderer of hundreds. Most notable was the Chippendale secretary with Christmas cards scattered over the writing surface. The scene was surreal, perhaps from a grade B movie.

*Stop looking at that, Jess. Move on.*

She couldn’t control the little shiver of some unknown fear jabbing her heart. Had Jake made plans for Christmas? She thought maybe she had at one time, but Clare ripped those to shreds. Funny, she didn’t care and probably would send him a thank you card if she got out of this with her heart still beating.

“Fontana?” He touched her arm. “Stay alert. Where the hell are they?”

“They’re here.”

“Sure as hell are!” He dragged her from the doorway, jamming his Glock in the waist of his jeans. “Straight ahead, Fontana.”

She waited until the guard was in full view and leveled her weapon on his heart, pulling the trigger twice. He fell to the floor.

“Time to take out the big dog now.” Jake stepped over the dead man and went into the room he’d come from.

Jessica kept a watch on the rear and followed him through the empty rooms of the house. He stopped.

“What’s wrong, Jake? They’ll be running if we mess this up.”

“They won’t run.” He straightened the launcher on his shoulder. He stepped back, then ran at the door, kicked it open, and stormed inside, yelling at the men to surrender to the FBI.

They didn’t, and he fired the launcher into the center of the group of men. Ten of the shooters crumpled under the explosion. The back wall blew out in a shower of bricks and glass.

“You’re under arrest, Azizi!” She’d seen him sliding along the wall, looking for an escape hatch. She ran after him, shouting out the



legal terms of arrest. “You’re under arrest for crimes against the United States, murder of American citizens and trading in weapons of mass destruction.” She sucked in a breath and went on. “Surrender now!”

He ignored her, and she wasn’t surprised. Funny, in person he was even smaller than he’d looked in the briefing photos.

Her head jerked around at the repeated roar coming from the house. Jake! He was fighting alone. Go back or let the devil go?

She turned and ran for the house, sliding in the blood on the floor where the first dead guard sprawled. She hugged the wall like she’d seen rats do, leaning over and sliding along the fancy fabric wallpaper.

More gunfire. Jake’s handgun. He had to be running low on ammo and needed her.

Glancing around the doorway where the fancy entry hall had been, Jessica zeroed in on Jake’s position among the clutter of wrecked furniture and walls.

The thrust and power of a blast from the launcher exploded in the gutted room, evening the score of six to one. He fell down to gasp for breath in the chewed-up debris.

She hunkered down, scrunching her shoulders in a useless but automatic attempt to escape the lead if it hit. At last, she saw him leaning against a splintered library table, bleeding hard from a wound she couldn’t see.

Her frantic hand signals finally caught his attention, and he waved off her advance. “Stay where you are, Fontana. There’s one sniping me from the library door.”

“I hear you.” She glimpsed the muzzle of a .45 as the gangster fired on Jake again.

Backing out of the room like a crawdad, she stayed flat until making it to the library entrance. Unable to breathe all she needed, her lungs were near bursting by the time she’d gotten to her feet and looked inside the battered room.

*Gotcha.*

The shooter heard her moving around, and turned to level his weapon at her head. Desperation gave her the edge, and she squeezed the cool trigger, relief swamping her as the guy with the look of shock on his face dropped dead in the clutter.

From where she stood, Jessica located the hoods holding Jake down. Two stood on the staircase taking pot shots at him from above. The other crouched behind an overturned couch.

She yelled at them, dropping to the floor before firing at the two on the fancy stairway. They toppled down the steps, winding up in a heap at the foot of the stairs.

Jake waved at her, still working on the launcher.

He stood, positioning the heavy weapon on his shoulder and fired across the room. In the after roar and thick smoke and dust, he was no longer visible.

She heard him before she could clearly see him in the haze.

“Where’s Azizi?”

“Escaping.”

He did little more than blink at her comment.

## Chapter Seventeen

He knew the exact moment he'd blown away the son of a bitch who'd shot him up with dope. It had been little enough payback for the beating he'd taken.

Now, the head prick was on the run, along with his dogs. They were probably tickled to death to get away from him. All this meant a search on foot, and he could barely walk a straight line. Keeping his inability from Fontana wouldn't be easy.

She was fired up, moving ahead, beating the brush for Azizi. Maybe he'd been stupid, going against the rules to push her out of the car. Naw, it'd probably saved her life. He wondered if she'd put that in her final report of the mission.

Hell with the report. If this were to be his last, he'd go out in a blaze of glory. Setting his jaw in a line of granite resolve, he hurried ahead to look for his partner.

He found her, kicking over empty crates and boxes in a derelict looking greenhouse. He admired her hard-as-nails way of training her weapon on anything suspect, keeping the Glock close to her chest while she scouted the area.

Their eyes met, and he realized everything wasn't in a pinwheel spin. No, her eyes were still in place and they were blue. He read something in her gaze, the charge of it bouncing around in his belly before he realized how great it felt.

Maybe he'd imagined it. Whatever, it had been like the first time for everything good that had happened to him. She motioned for him to move up beside her. His voice may have been a little off when he spoke to her.

“Honey, did you want to tell me something?” No way in hell could he control the oddball grin on his mouth, or the amateurish way he checked his rifle for ammo. “I saw you looking at me.”

The scowl on her pretty face amazed and frightened him. The frost in her voice amused him. “Of course I looked at you, Claypool.” She leaned back against the wall to rub her hip. “I do want to say something, Jake. If you’re not able to keep up, tell me so right now. I think you’re still too far under the drug influence to keep yourself alive, much less both of us.”

He focused on her face and understood the severity of their predicament. “You don’t have to worry about me holding up my end of the log.” Damn, she thought he was weak. He had to prove he was worth taking along. “Tell me what’s really eating you.”

She told him what she’d found in the storage shed. “We’re too late to help Yaquero. He’s dead of course.”

He knew in blood-chilling detail of the way and time the brave ambassador had died. Jake had been forced to watch while the fat ape hacked the man’s head from his shoulders. It had been a show of insane bravado. The victim had been dead for a while after getting a bullet in his brain. Maybe it was a good thing he’d been drugged. The bloody details of the gruesome scene would haunt him forever.

“We did the best we could at the time. And with everything that’s happened, we’re lucky to be alive. Don’t let it get personal.”

She looked around the doorway before speaking. “I’ve never screwed up a mission before, Claypool. We’ll probably be busted down to entry-level or drummed out of the agency.”

“Never happen, Honey.” He wasn’t as confident as he sounded. He closed his eyes and breathed deep, waiting for what, he didn’t know.

In his mind, or what he was sure was left of it, he made a vow with the only thing he had left and was sure of. His manhood. He was not letting that skinny, sex-starved rat get away this time.

They heard it at the same time, a muffled, powerful motor gunned in a fast-moving getaway, tires spitting gravel against the building they were in.

He couldn't believe how fast she moved. Fontana was out the door and running down the road, apparently chasing Azizi.

"Fontana! Hold up."

His legs were on the mend, and he sprinted after her. At least he thought power ripped through his muscles.

The silver Rolls and his partner disappeared around a curve in the road.

*Damn woman would be the end of him.*

He ran then, following the echoing boom of a tremendous collision. Fortune was with him, his eyesight clearing enough to see the scene unfolding fifty yards away.

Smoke curled up to the treetops from a demolished mess of metal and chrome.

Azizi crawled from the car, gripping a large .45 and looking for an escape hatch. Blood streamed from a gash on his forehead.

He appeared shocked to see the crimson on his silk shirtsleeve. Pain registered on his face after he noticed Fontana stalking toward him. Azizi must have gotten the idea how a trapped rat felt, his fancy clothes hanging on him like dirty rags. Probably the first time in his miserable life he'd been filthy.

He took off, Fontana hard on his heels.

"Stop! Hands over your head!" She gained on him. "You're under arrest, Azizi."

Jake once thought hearing those words coming from a woman would be comical. Nothing amusing about her strong command. She meant business.

Azizi wasn't buying.

Okay, this had gone way too far to suit Jake. Goofy or not, he was the commander of this job.

He caught up with her, pulling rank with calm deliberation. "Load my weapon, partner. That's an order." Now he clearly saw her expression of refusal. "I mean it, honey. And I'm straight now."

She nodded, pulling his Glock from the top pocket of her cargo pants, and slapped a full round in it before handing it to him.

He was grateful she'd not seen fit to tell him to go to hell. "Let's finish this."

She stayed by his side while they tracked Azizi, and let him take control of the situation. They caught sight of a red silk shirt ahead and Jake sped up, finger curled against the hair trigger.

"Azizi." Grimacing with grim determination, he yelled at the fleeing killer. "Halt! This is your last chance to surrender."

Azizi paused to glare at them. Eyes glazed over from his last jolt of dope, he was high and going to be stupid.

He raised the weapon he carried and fired, the shot going wide of their position. Showing amazing agility, he vaulted over the top of logs rotting by the roadside, disappearing into the brush.

*Stupid son of a bitch.*

Jake didn't enjoy blowing anyone away, but this idiot didn't seem to want it any other way.

They split up, following their target easily by using the noise he made in his flight. Jake lost the sound and worried about Fontana. Azizi could easily set up an ambush.

Taking to the road again, Jake tried to see his partner. Adrenaline spiked through his muscles. He swallowed the huge lump of concern that stuck in his throat.

Going against everything he'd been taught, he called out to her. "Fontana!" He didn't like the silence. But, the sudden crashing of brush and limbs meant desperate moving. "Call out your position, Fontana!"

Still nothing. Damn it. Was she too proud or in big trouble?

He waited a few seconds, getting a better fix on the source of the noise before shouldering his way into the thick undergrowth.

The sound of gasping and low moaning took on more volume. The sound of running could only be coming from an out of shape drug user like Azizi.

The noise exploded outward from the brush and Jake caught a blurring glimpse of Azizi with Fontana on his tail.

Jake raced after them, shouting at his target for the last time. “Stop! Or I’ll shoot!”

He couldn’t fire. Fontana was too close and not backing up. She lost a step, grabbing at her hip and finally falling on her face.

The man she chased spun around ready to fight, staring at her for a split second. He appeared to be as shocked as she was. But not too stunned to throw down on her.

Jake was through yelling warnings. He felt nothing seeing the murderer expire with a slug in his heart.

## Chapter Eighteen

She was alive. Safe in Jake's arms, touching his beautiful, beat-up face. He finally cut through all the tough cowboy stuff and showed tenderness. Until he opened his mouth.

"Falling down on the job won't earn you any brownie points." His eye had swollen completely shut. "You gonna make it, Fontana?"

"There's no way I'll not make it now." She lay still for several minutes, tired of being afraid and sick of chasing creeps like Azizi until they were dead. Damn. Her skin seemed cold to her. She became aware of his gaze and smiled up at him. "Thanks Jake."

He gave her his star quality smile and touched the filthy rag holding a hank of her hair in a gnarled ponytail. "Stay here and I'll snag us a ride."

"In there. Keys for that big black truck under the carport."

He fumbled for the keys and clenched his teeth when she gasped. "I know you're hurting, honey. I'll get you out of here pronto."

The instant he was out of sight, Jessica shut her eyes and groaned. Pain she'd been bearing up under demanded a reaction, and she obliged. Biting her lip stopped the wail that tried to escape. She was finding new ways to hide pain. So far, however, she had the feeling suffering in silence had reached its limit.

Thinking of Jake helped. He couldn't be in any better shape than her. Head trauma from the car wreck, open wounds from severe beatings, and possible long-term effects from an unknown drug. She exhaled over a tremulous sigh.

The deep silence lying over the estate seemed strange after the ear-splitting sounds of war. The fancy oriental water fountain pumped



water and dumped it with a quiet splash and hollow thud of huge bamboo pipes.

*Damn strange place.*

That had to be the reason she thought about getting home, and the inevitable debriefing of the mission.

Would she stand up to those questions that demanded straight, rational, believable answers? Why was she worried? She had nothing to fear.

Looking back, she'd never been sent out on a mission back-loaded with so many things that went wrong or so fast. If she believed in magic or fate, she'd have to think this mission had been jinxed.

*Stop making excuses! You screwed up.*

Thirst overcame pain, and she stood, limping to a faucet that dripped clear water. Amazed that it still clung to a wall, she twisted the tap, bending to drink from the splashing liquid.

Having slaked her thirst, she leaned wearily against a low brick wall.

She couldn't stop thinking ahead, a sense of dread clutching at her insides.

Her answers would not sit well with the suits back in Dallas. They'd want a whipping boy, and it seemed only reasonable it had to be her. Or Jake. She exhaled, closing her eyes in exhaustion.

*Stop making excuses. You screwed up.*

The rumble of the approaching truck meant Jake was on his way to pick her up. Just like he would if she had been waiting on the curb in front of a grocery store. She shook her head to clear the sentimental scene, wondering wryly if she'd gotten some illegal substance from the water.

She straightened and watched the shiny red vehicle rolling toward her. This could be a scene from a sci-fi movie. A house in shambles, but the automobiles were in pristine condition.

The rumble of the truck's engine was strangely soothing. Something familiar, just like the war-riddled man driving. Oh no, she

couldn't break down and cry now. He'd probably drive off and leave her.

"Hey, pretty lady." Jake leaned across the seat and smiled at her. "Going my way?"

"Do you mind if I cry a little?" She wiped tears away with her tattered shirt. "I know it makes me look weak."

"Baloney." He opened the door for her to get in. "I'd lay down fire with you anytime, Jessica."

## Chapter Nineteen

Jessica and Jake drove away from the smoldering rubble of Azizi's den of horrors. Grappling with her emotions, Jessica prepared for what she expected at her forthcoming debriefing.

She wavered close to tears once again, remembering their jump into the jungle, and constant running for their lives.

Her vivid thoughts took her to the office of FBI Headquarters in Dallas. Already tense, waiting to be called in the Director's office, she tapped her pen on the logbook and spoke quietly.

"I don't plan to take a lot of heat for the outcome of this mission."

Jake apparently didn't hear the seriousness of her words. "You're tired and pissed off, Fontana. After a shower and meal, you'll be ready to roll again."

Her gaze slipped to his profile and pangs of sympathy winged through her heart. He'd taken a horrible beating, yet he never lost sight of the fact he was a government agent.

And to her amazement and relief, he'd affirmed he'd again go out in the field with her. If they were ever assigned to work together again.

She clenched her teeth, trying to ward off the shiver of dread threading its way up her spine.

There was a lot of truth to his words. She'd been in pain, filthy and hungry so long, the job description of the mission had gotten lost.

Finding she had been too late to help the ambassador and seeing the horror of how he'd died wrung the last bit of hope from her.

The warmth of Jake's arm was comforting and eased some of her worry.

“You think too much, Fontana.” He handed her a folded paper. “I found this map in one of those fancy sport cars. Figure out which direction we should go.”

He pulled to a stop at the entry gate and lit a huge cigar. She shook her head, envying his ability to relax. “Where did you get that?” She caught the fragrant aroma of the obviously expensive cigar while spreading the map over her knees.

“Same place I found the map. Want one?” He blew a huge smoke ring out the window.

“No thanks.” His lopsided grin warmed her mood, bringing thoughts of laughter and the quiet of an evening on her deck in Seattle. “Take a left at the next road, go ten miles. We’ll hit the highway and turn left again. Ten more and we’re almost home free.”

“Fasten your seatbelt, Fontana.” He shoved the truck into gear, puffing on the cigar clenched in his teeth. He looked at her, and she could see in his gaze the lawman was back. He wouldn’t really relax until they were back in Dallas.

“Let’s get out of here.” She tossed the map on the floor and buckled up.

He crushed the fire of the cigar in the ashtray and put his arm around her again.

“I’ll get this thing rolling, babe.” He held her steady while the big truck shot down the road. She’d never complain about anything he did again.

The scent of jungle flowers drifted through the open windows, reminding her of their brief, tumultuous lovemaking. Heady and far out of reach, yet the sweetness of the moment would be with her always.

\* \* \* \*

Jake hoped he was good enough behind the wheel to avoid hitting anything that crossed the narrow road. Fontana hadn’t said anything

about the excessive speed or his rotten driving yet. Just one more reason he liked being with her.

She relaxed against him, and he noticed once again how small she was. Sure, Fontana was tough, but she was an elegant woman that had been tromped on pretty hard. She'd taken it all with no complaints.

"Let's grab a good meal and a soft bed tonight. We need to regroup before flying back."

She inhaled and looked straight ahead. "One of us has to contact headquarters."

"I'll do it. While you shower."

"I wouldn't mind a shower and clean clothes." She touched her tangled, muddy hair. "Not to mention food and a real night's sleep."

"You've got it, lady." Jake didn't have to check under his arm. He stank. She had to be sick of his stench.

They ran into some real traffic on the outskirts of Managua. A crazy mix of ancient wrecks and gleaming sports cars clogged the roadway. Most of the drivers had little regard for regulation or stop signs. For his tired partner's sake, he slowed his speed and held his temper until he saw a sign touting the desirability of a nearby hotel.

He spotted the newer looking building and turned off the road into the parking lot. Fontana swiped at her hair and fussed with the buttons on her tattered shirt.

He held out his hand. "You're stunning."

"Where were you while I made a fool of myself all these years?" Her smile was soft and teasing.

"You didn't need me, babe." She gripped his fingers and slid across the seat. He opened the door and helped her out.

A burst of cool air hit him in the face as he opened the door to the hotel lobby. The hotel wasn't the Ritz Carlton, but it was new and clean. Plus, the place had a certain air of dignity. Kind of dark, but who cared? It was free of thugs and humidity.

The desk clerk eyed them with some curiosity and superiority, asking the usual questions. "May I help you?"

He eyeballed their filthy condition, probably trying to decide between calling the law or giving them a room.

Jake pulled out his wallet and handed the clerk his credit card. “You sure can. One double with the biggest bed and sauna you’ve got. We want good sheets and lots of soap. Bring up coffee and wine and any good hors d’oeuvres you recommend. We’ll eat in the dining room this evening.”

“Of certain, Mister Claypool.” The clerk now stared with some amusement. “Will there be anything else?”

“Hell, yes.” Jake took Jessica’s hand. “Have your nearest and best dress shop proprietor and men’s clothier come to our suite, and if you make it pronto, I’ll tip handsomely.”

Amazing how quickly people move once motivated by the smell of cash.

Things swung into action. They were on the way to their comfortable suite in a matter of minutes. The bellhop stood grinning like a Cheshire cat, waiting for his handout. Jake shook his head. “Not until we have everything I ordered, my man.”

Before they closed the door, the house detective blocked their doorway. “You have had trouble? Were you attacked?” He gestured to Jake’s wounds. “Did you fall or something?”

Jessica laughed and held her hand up as if she found his comments amusing. “Oh, my, no.” She jerked her thumb in Jake’s direction. “He crashed our Jeep back in the forest where we had been working on a water conservation project. We’re returning home on the first flight out.”

The hotel dick studied her for a minute, shrugging. “Okay. Come to Nicaragua again.”

Jake blinked at the word she’d said so sweetly. Home.

He’d be going back to his humdrum life, going from one miserable mission to another. He had to admit his life was so empty he never turned down any job, always volunteered no matter what it

entailed, and kept a running schedule of missions just so he wouldn't feel the hole in his heart.

Now, because of Fontana, he wanted to make plans, and damn it, maybe fall in love.

*Listen to your feminine side yakking up a storm, Claypool. She won't have you.*

Okay, change her mind.

"Want me to run a bath for you, Fontana?" He stripped off his filthy shirt. "On the other hand, I can't think of anything I'd rather do than share the soap with you."

Oh hell, he'd gone too far with his barnyard style. She hadn't answered, simply threw her grubby duds out the bathroom door.

"Jake?"

His head jerked up and his ears roared. "Yeah, babe?"

"I'm all alone."

*You won't be for long, gorgeous.*

He yanked off his jeans and threw them across the room. She had to be the perfect woman to let an animal like him in her shower. God, he could really go for Fontana.

He almost tripped over his own feet after opening the door to find her waiting, sleek and inviting in the shower spray. The water fell on an exquisite beauty by the name of Jessica.

Should he jump right in or wait for her invitation?

*Man, you're a changed hound. You're more like a Spaniel now.*

"Jess?"

She held her hand out and waited for him to join her under the spray. "Wash my hair and I'll wash yours."

He wanted to please her, but first he had to taste her soft mouth. Their lips touched tenderly before his closed over hers in a demanding kiss that couldn't possibly leave any doubt in her mind as to what he was thinking.

He pulled away to gaze into her eyes. "You're so damned sweet."

It was hard as hell to hold off on just plain trying to screw her, but this was Jessica. She'd know he was ready just by the pressure of his blue steel erection pressed against her fine body.

He gave into the foreplay she seemed to need, taking the tube of shampoo and squeezing a glob out in his palm. Turning her away from him, he almost bucked against her lean ass, the hard globes of woman muscle, long and lean. Her hair was a tangled nest, but the soap seemed to release the knots as his fingers slipped through them.

He couldn't get her back to facing him fast enough, but was careful not to throw her down. She stroked his belly, and he almost fell from the jolt of being gripped in her soapy, slick fingers. "You're a well built man, Jake. Thick and hard."

The woman knew what to say and do. He played dumb and rinsed the shampoo from her long hair before rubbing the fragrant bar of soap over her beautiful shoulders. He wanted to yell like a wild animal while she grasped his balls in her hand, gently squeezing until his member jumped to attention against his belly.

Enough was enough, his control at a minimum now. Bubbles of soap ran down her breasts, and he had to cup them in his palms, lifting their nice weight and leaning in to suck their rosy nipples.

She gasped, working his erection with a firm, long stroke that would have him climax too quickly.

"I want to please you, Jessica."

"Yes." Her soft agreement spurred him on, sending him on a search for her favorite things. His fingers coaxed and teased until her folds were swollen around his fingers, her wetness oiling them when they went deep inside to tantalize the spot she offered freely.

"Yes...yes. Hold me tighter, Jake." Her breathing was quick and the tightening of her muscles around his fingers meant he'd been successful in pleasing her. "I want you to make love to me, Jake."

It was too fast for him. He'd gotten his hormones to simmer a bit and wanted to explore the beauty in his arms.



“Want me to wash you all over, baby?” He took the pink sponge and soaped it, touching it to her neck and shoulders before sliding it down her back. He moved it around to caress her ass before soaping up her belly.

“You’re evil, Jake.”

“You’re beautiful, Jessica.” He pressed against her then, kissing her mouth with the hunger he could no longer hold at bay. He wanted her and pushed his knee between her thighs. She gripped him in her fingers guiding him to her warm center, standing on tiptoe to take him in.

She met his thrusts with power to match, her leg lifting to grip him in a tight lock just before she came, her nails digging into his back as she released her passion. He gave in and pumped into her, letting the heavy weight in his sac burst free in a rush of blinding climax.

He was rubber-legged after that, holding her on his leg while she finished a second climax.

Jake knew he wasn’t much at thinking or saying pretty stuff, but Jessica filled his need and his life to the full. Her way of kissing aroused and assured him he was a desirable man in her eyes. Her touch excited him like being hit by a charge of lightning.

She’d come twice and used her luscious body to pleasure him again after washing his hair and body. She was tender, passionate and sexy as hell. Just what he needed to make breathing worth the effort.

They dried each other, stopping to kiss and touch before they finished. Jake carried her to the bed and laid down beside her.

“I hope I didn’t hurt your leg in there.”

“And I was worried about hurting you.” She laughed and kissed him, working her hand down his belly to the thick hair around his length.

He groaned, and she frowned when someone knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” Jake tried to sound civil, something he didn’t feel at the moment.

“The shopkeepers, sir. You requested them.”

“Oh hell.” He got up and slipped the hotel robe on, tossing one to Jessica. “Okay. I’m coming.” He winked at her and whispered. “Don’t forget where we left off.”

## **Chapter Twenty**

Jessica had chosen carefully, selecting clothing that was simple sophistication. She'd settled on navy silk slacks and a relaxed jacket to match. Several white blouses completed the outfit, the items sufficient to get her home.

The very shrewd salesman had brought along shoes. She chose smart black pumps and a pair of soft leather flats.

The undergarments were unbelievably feminine and soft, the feel of them against her cheek like heaven after being in filthy pants for so long. Jake settled on a spiffy sport coat of soft gray and several pairs of comfortable slacks in black and navy. He'd frowned, but taken the loafers the men's clothier had brought.

She stayed on the bed while he made the call to headquarters. He kept his voice low, but his hand gestures clearly spoke of his anger.

After he hung up, Jake fell back into a playful mood.

"I'll call for our pass at the airport, and then we can have dinner." He was already taking his credit card out again. "What'll it be, babe? Shrimp, filet mignon, or chicken kabob?"

She licked her lips. "All of that, plus I want chocolate cake with chocolate ice cream and a gallon of good coffee."

She loved the way he never questioned what she'd said or her reason for saying it. His soft drawl as he ordered their meal tickled her inner thighs. The way his hair spiked and parted haphazardly was nothing but seductive.

"Jake."

"We have plenty of time."

The man was the smartest she'd ever known, insightful and generous. He hung up the phone and went back to the bed, stripping before leaning over to kiss her.

He released her hair from the neat coil at her nape, pushing her down to the soft comforter.

"Jake, you make me feel so good, so...woman."

He wedged in between her thighs, groaning with pleasure. "Jess, if I'd known all this when we first met, I'd have had a heart attack on the spot. You're perfect."

Oh yes, she loved hearing all the fancy new things he said, but in her heart she knew he was just being complimentary out of gentleman training.

As much as she cared for, longed for him, she'd not risk having her heart handed back to her after he grew weary of her. Losing Jake would be too hard. She wouldn't survive.

He was hot for her now, but Jake was a no-strings man. That wasn't what she wanted. She'd been a fool to give in to her desires. Jake was what she wanted full-time. Since that was never going to happen, it had to end.

But, tonight was tonight. Another world. "I found some massage lube in the bathroom."

"I'll do you first."

He jumped off the bed and returned seconds later. She heard the cap of the lubricant hit the dresser, could smell the almond oil as he warmed it in his palms.

His hands covered her back, and the warmth and pressure as he spread the gel was the most sensuous thing she'd felt in a while. Well, ever.

"My god, Jake. You're creating a hot-blooded, dirty girl here." She stretched her legs and arms in the luxury of being pampered.

"I'm not finished." He traced her shoulders and her spine, hands drifting over her rib cage and down to cup her breasts. Her nipples

were peaked like hard buds, ready to burst under his touch. “Have anything else needing attention, beautiful?”

She reached back to slap his thigh. “Keep hunting, Mister.”

Her breath caught and quivered in her throat after his hand slid under her to cup between her legs, her folds pulsing with hot desire. Without fumbling, or juvenile searching, his fingers slid into her tensed center, pushing in and withdrawing until she yelled at him.

“Claypool! You’ve found it.”

He lifted her, turning her onto her back.

“I take it you want sex.”

“You’d be so right.”

\* \* \* \*

Jake was not his usual talkative self, and she’d taken on a worried expression. He didn’t question her, but he didn’t like it. Admitting to himself he had no skill at fixing the things women worried about, he kept quiet.

They walked away from the special ticket line where they were issued passes to carry on their weapons after being grilled for half an hour. Maybe she was worried about the Department’s take on their botched assignment.

“Fontana.” She looked up with a start. “You going straight back to Seattle, or hanging out at Dallas for a while?”

Her shoulders lifted a little. “I’d really like to get home to see about the delivery service. My employees are great, but I need to be there as much as possible.”

“I understand.” He quieted until she took the outside seat when they boarded. “I guess I’ll be going out on another mission pretty quick.”

“They told you that last night?” She lowered her gaze and looked away. “I hope you get a much safer one next time.”

Jake wasn't worried about the next assignment. The more dangerous, the faster time passed. Hell, that's the way he used to feel. Not now. He wanted to spend time with her. Okay, wait until you get home and she's over the fear of what the freaking department throws at them.

"Hey." He put his arm around her shoulders. "It's almost Christmas. Why don't we paint the town before you head for home?"

"I don't think so." She made that short and clear. "The sooner I leave, the sooner I get things in order at home."

"You're talking about the punk?" He couldn't stop the jolt of resentment in his gut.

"I'm being sensible."

"Oh, nice. That's what they call 'get lost' now?"

She'd closed him out, drinking the scotch the attendant had given her. He didn't know she drank. The scowl on her face said she didn't.

Hell, there were a thousand things he didn't know about Fontana.

Leaning back in his seat, he closed his eyes, trying to stop the little scenes of their lovemaking from drifting through his mind.

*Lord, Fontana. I can't just let you go without a fight.*

Hours of sparse conversation bugged Jake. He wanted to ask her a million questions, or maybe just hear her voice.

"Are you still being sensible?"

Batting her lashes, she looked at him like a sleepy kitten. "Are you still talking Christmas?"

Whatever, he had gotten a response from her.

"Sure. We can go shopping, decorate a tree, and stay in my apartment." His thoughts raced through his dwelling, trying to locate anything that would send her screaming out the door. Nothing popped up. He was always pretty careful about cleaning up. Funny, he couldn't remember his last visitor. "Well, what do you say?"

"You're sweet to offer, Jake, but I have a suite reserved. I'll stay there."

He didn't know what to call the pain slicing through his gut. Disappointment, maybe some anger, because he figured she'd try to hook up with that prick again. Damn it. Well, he was through begging. So long sister. I have plenty of phone numbers.

*Yeah, and none of them ever said maybe.*

## Chapter Twenty-One

Jessica saw the irony of it, the quiet tension in the interrogation room and the cheerful ring-a-ling sound of the Salvation Army's kettle bell.

Her meandering thoughts were corralled by the arrival of her partner. Jake nodded and sat across from her at the conference table, then tossed his report folder down.

"Fontana." He rubbed his chin. He was now sporting a nice five o'clock shadow.

"Claypool." She hated the unfamiliar distance between them, silently willing the meeting into warp speed.

Years of being tough and holding her tongue made it impossible to tell him why she'd pulled back. Now she wished desperately for the ability to explain her fear of being rejected by him.

*You botched it again, Jessica. It's too late.*

Her nerves were now crisp as tinsel on a tree, and her stomach turned over for the tenth time that day. Frank Adler entered the room, his expression unreadable as he collected the final reports she and Jake had written.

Jessica could envision him dropping them, mixing the two accounts and getting vastly differing versions of what went down. She handed her report to Frank, swallowing back a sigh of relief when he didn't throw it down. The debriefing session earlier had been rough and wasn't over yet.

"Your written accounts fill in most of the blanks." He scanned her notes. "What happened the last few minutes you were in the air?"



She controlled the sharp reply that hammered at her teeth to escape. “We became aware of the presence of an electrical or wiring problem and did a routine search of the plane.”

“Who noticed the problem first and what was done?”

“It was a simultaneous action. We both did what we could to remedy the situation.”

“In your report, you stated the aircraft was not air worthy when you took charge of it.”

“That’s correct.” Okay, her job with the department was going out the window. “The faulty wiring had been overlooked by maintenance.”

Frank perused her file for several long minutes, until her body shook with tension. “Anything else, Fontana?”

“Yes, sir.” She gazed steadily at Jake. “Agent Claypool did everything possible to land the aircraft. He carried out this mission with complete competence and did everything in his power to save Ambassador Yaqueros.”

“Duly noted.” Frank shut the folder. “Agent Claypool. Do you have anything to add, other than what we went over in the situation room?”

“I won’t fly another plane those goons have serviced. Period.” Jake’s gaze riveted to the bruise on her cheek. “I want full and fast restitution for the money we spent getting back here.”

“Done,” Frank said, heading for the door. “Welcome home. We know this was difficult.” He turned back to speak to her. “Agent Claypool’s report was basically the same as yours. He had nothing but high praise for your handling of the situation. There’s a possibility of sending you out with Claypool again.”

Her crazy heart pounded with excitement, but common sense screamed no.

“Thank you, sir.”

Frank smiled and opened the door. “We want you both to know your work is appreciated. I’ll file your final reports.”

They were alone at last, and Jessica slowly gathered up her personal items, ready to leave Dallas the day after Christmas.

*Today was Christmas Eve. Ho ho ho.*

Frank opened the door again, smiling as if they were all best friends. “The department Christmas party is being held at The Longhorn Bar. Just a few blocks from here. You should come by.”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

*Sure, and show up there alone looking like you’re stalking Jake.*

God, she was pathetic. Then again, why not go? She had time to find something to wear. Maybe. She looked up to see Jake’s blue gaze touching her face.

He stood and smiled at her. “He’s right, Fontana. You did a man-sized job out there. You saved my bacon more than once.”

She wanted to hold him tight and touch the white bandage on his forehead and kiss his stitched up chin.

“We looked out for each other, Jake. Thank you for the vote of confidence.”

He lifted his hand, saluting her with a crooked grin. “Like I said, I’d go out in the field with you anytime, Agent Fontana.”

She couldn’t answer, the lump in her throat making it too painful to speak. He left the room, leaving her alone with tears splashing down her cheeks.

*When will I see you again?*

The answer was wrenchingly obvious. Her lawman was gone.

She left the building, heart in her shoes, half seeing the merchandise in the decorated windows. Nothing spoke to her, not until the little black chiffon number in the showcase caught her eye. The shop was obviously high-end with price tags to match.

She went in, and her first thoughts were confirmed. Everything was expensive, catering to small sizes and quantities. The short black dress was perfect, nipped in waist, cap sleeves, and a short skirt softly drifting about her knees.

Before she left the shop, she bought an evening bag for her weapon and strappy, black heels to make her look good.

If Claypool wasn't there, she'd have to resign herself to being the loser she was quickly becoming.

\* \* \* \*

Jake threw his jacket on top of the slacks he'd considered wearing to the lame-assed department party. He wasn't going. If he didn't, his performance review would say he wasn't a team player, anti-social, and aloof. Whatever the hell that meant.

He reached for the phone, but couldn't remember any of the chick's names he'd dated. He knew there was no way he'd call anyone except Fontana. She hadn't left his thoughts, and his life was not his to control.

Stop it, man. She's the best thing you've ever come in contact with. The only thing she's done is make you realize what a dud you are.

He grabbed the slacks and shirt, ripped off their protective plastic cover, and threw fresh underwear on the bed. He was going to that bash and find Fontana. If she wasn't there, he'd go to her hotel. When he found her, he'd make it clear she needed him.

*Even if you have to beg.*

Thirty minutes later, he was showered, freshly shaved, dressed and smelling like a freaking flower. He was ready to claim his mate.

\* \* \* \*

Jessica had never felt so conspicuously alone. She'd arrived at the party late, hoping no one noticed her.

To fit in with the crowd, she took a glass of champagne, touching it to her lips as she walked around the edge of the crowd.

“Fontana.” Someone called to her from across the room. “Over here. Glad you could make it.”

After dancing on the hot seat all afternoon, she didn’t feel like socializing with Frank. She smiled brightly and waved, pretending to be involved in a conversation with a group nearby.

The music was good but left her feeling melancholy. She shouldn’t have come. Everyone in the crowd looked like cops. Making it worse, that special cop was nowhere in sight.

Of course, he wasn’t there. Why would a single guy come to this controlled atmosphere with nothing but people he worked with? She should have thought of that before coming here like a desperate fool.

Escape presented itself in the form of French doors near the bar. She moved toward them, glancing over her shoulder, hoping no one noticed her tuck-tail exit.

In the cool darkness, she looked around. There must be a way out of there, a way to get back to her hotel and out of Dallas. She didn’t know how she’d face the dismal night waiting for her.

Fighting off the crushing weight of loneliness, Jessica hurried toward the fancy iron gate of the fence surrounding the courtyard.

Something made her turn and look back. A dream, maybe. She squinted to see through the mist that had begun to fall. No, this was no dream. He stood looking at her with his lawman eyes and heartbreaking smile.

“Jake!”

She didn’t mind sounding overjoyed. She was! Running across the patio like a woman in love. Oh, god, she was so in love.

“Jessica!”

He caught her in a hard embrace, kissing her with fevered passion. “Were you really leaving me?”

“I’m so sorry, Jake.” She clung to him with no intention of ever letting go. “I just couldn’t stand being here without you.”

“I came here to find you, babe. To tell you I’m crazy in love with you.” He touched her hair, pressing quick kisses to her lips. “I won’t let you go until you admit you feel the same way.”

“I do love you, Jake. So very much.” Tears clouded her eyes and her voice shook with emotion. “You didn’t have to come here. I was coming to find you.”

“Lord, Jess. You had me scared.” He hugged her closer. “Don’t ever walk away without saying you’ll be back”

“I’ll never make you wonder, Jake.”

The night was beautiful now. The man she’d once thought might be a little diversion had become her life partner.

He took her hand, leading her through the gate to his car. “Agent Fontana.”

“Yes, Agent Claypool.”

“Let’s go back to my apartment and get real comfortable. We have plans to make.”

“Yes, darling.” With her man holding her in his arms, she seemed to float on air, her heart bursting with love for him. “This could just take the rest of our lives.”

**THE END**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I have always loved books. Reading was a passion early in my life. I read everything the famous and not so famous authors wrote. I was a diehard historical romance-only fan until I found contemporary to be just as satisfying to read. I began the rocky journey to publication, blind to all the rules and terribly afraid of rejection. With the help of patient critique partners and surviving more than a few disappointments, my first full-length novel was accepted for publication.

I live in the Midwest, and enjoy being near my two adult children and my wonderful wildflower garden. I will never stop being delighted by the notes sent by a reader commenting on my work. Hearing from readers is important to me. I want to write stories that stay with you for a long while. I do it all for you.

### *Also by Betty Womack*

Siren Classic: *The Stetson*  
Siren Classic: *Palace of the Jaguar*  
Siren Classic: *Her Private John*  
Fast and Easy: *Fast and Easy*  
Siren Classic: *Hot for Nick*  
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